Bryson Purdon Social Research

Understanding the lives of separating and separated families in the UK: what evidence do we need?

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Summary

1. Introduction

This study was designed to address three broad questions:

- What are the evidence – and data – needs around family separation in the UK?
- How far are these needs met by administrative, survey and other research data that currently exist or are in the process of being developed?
- What additional data are required, and how would these best be collected?

Our wide-ranging consultation and desk research highlight significant shortcomings in the UK evidence base on family separation. Administrative data include only a proportion of separated families. Bespoke, largely cross-sectional, studies provide depth on individual issues, but their specific policy lens limits the ability to look holistically at family separation over time. And the large-scale, multi-purpose longitudinal studies are restricted in the data they can reasonably collect on family separation.

In theory, more could be made of existing longitudinal studies to help build up the evidence base on separating and separated families, and this has the potential to be a cost-effective approach. However, current sample sizes and restrictions on adding interview content mean that these studies cannot feasibly be expected to address *all* the gaps. An alternative and potentially better option for delivering against the *full* range of evidence needs identified is a new bespoke study. However, there are methodological challenges in setting up and running such a study, and the current climate means securing funding for a new study will be difficult. The following areas would need further development both to inform a new study and to make better use of existing resources: identifying how best to boost samples with newly separated parents; improving the identification and retention of non-resident parents; and enhanced question modules to address key evidence gaps adequately.

2. Why we need data to understand families

Within our society, families provide – or are expected to provide – a bedrock on which we rely throughout the life course:

…Children's upbringing and family relationships over the life course affect life chances and wellbeing

There is a wealth of evidence on the importance of 'family' – or, more specifically, the relationships between parents and children – across the life course, which spans academic disciplines and policy areas. Research from both psychology and health makes clear the effects of parenting styles and parental attachment on many child outcomes that extend into

adulthood (e.g. Dozier et al, 2008). The sociology and demography literatures highlight links between family structure, and the fluidity of those structures, and the life chances of both parents and children (e.g. Clarke-Stewart and Brentano, 2007).

The financial interdependency of families, both within and across households, is a key focus of economists and those interested in the link between income and life chances (Duncan et al, 1998). Gerontologists articulate the role of the parent-child relationship in older age, with current debates focusing on both the support roles that older people play for their adult children (for instance, providing informal childcare (e.g. Bryson et al, 2012) and financial gift-giving) (Albertini et al, 2007) and the support that they themselves require (Bonsang, 2009).

…Policies and services are designed with a presumption that individuals are part of a wider family structure

Policy-making and service design are often based on implicit or explicit assumptions about the roles of families. Indeed, the current government's 'Family Test' seeks to recognise the potential impact of any new policy on 'the family' (Abreu, 2017). The welfare, and to a lesser extent tax, systems assume a financial interdependency between household members. The law provides couples (although sometimes only married couples) with financial and decision-making rights. Parents, whether or not they live with their children, have responsibilities towards them. And among separated families, parents are legally required to support their children financially.

…So, it is essential to have data on these families - and the effectiveness of policy and practice in supporting them – across the *range* of family structures that we have within the UK

Given the centrality of the 'family' to the healthy functioning of our society and to the well-being of individuals within them, we need data to understand 'families', how they and the individuals within them are affected by policy and practice, and the outcomes for families and individuals who follow varying trajectories. To do this, our datasets – whether administrative or research-led – must capture 'families' in their broadest forms and be unconstrained by increasingly anachronistic assumptions about family structures.

…Yet, our current evidence base is much stronger on more 'traditional' family structures, and less strong in terms of those which emerge through family separation

Although research studies increasingly recognise the need to reflect more diverse family structures than couples who are the biological parents of their children, data collected about other family types often remain limited. The focus continues to be on the household in which the children live, with non-resident parent families treated as 'secondary' (with data on them often collected by proxy from the resident parent).

Moreover, the 'separated family'[1] is too often regarded as being just the separated parents and their children, with insufficient regard for the step-relatives who contribute to how the

[1] By 'separation' we refer to families in which the child does not live with both their parents, with no assumption that they ever did so. Our focus is on situations where the child lives with one parent (for most of the time) or in an equal shared care arrangement. Situations where a child is living apart from their parents due to state intervention from social services are outside of the scope of our study.

families function and to the outcomes that result. Administrative data, in particular, have very limited ability to identify more complex family structures. All in all, in order to strengthen the evidence base on families we need to reflect on how we approach data collection on family separation. The case for this is developed in the following sections.

3. Why we need data to understand separating and separated families

Policy, practitioner and research communities need more robust and nuanced data on the experiences, trajectories and outcomes of separating and separated families with dependent children because:

…Family separation affects millions of families and children

The absolute number – and proportion – of families and children who experience separation in the UK is substantial. One in six children are born into a family in which their birth parents do not live together (ONS, 2016) and one in three children experience the separation of their parents during their childhood (OECD, 2013). Around two per cent of families with dependent children separate each year (authors' analysis), resulting in 2.5 million separated families raising over four million children at any point in time (Punton-Li et al, 2012). Three million children are living in single parent households (25 per cent of children), and a further one million with step-parents (eight per cent of children) (ONS, 2015).

Most separated parents were previously married, but a decline in marriage rates and an increase in cohabitation (Perelli-Harris et al, 2010) mean that this balance is likely to change, especially as cohabiting relationships (when they do not result in marriage) are, on average, more fragile than marriages (Kiernan and Mensah, 2010).

…Family separation can be associated with poorer outcomes for children

Separation is a significant life event that carries an increased risk of negative consequences and poorer life chances for both parents and children (e.g. Amato, 2005; Mooney et al, 2009, Goisis et al, 2016). For many children, family break-up brings social and emotional instability coupled with financial disadvantage that can impact on all areas of their lives, from economic and material to deeply-felt social and emotional insecurity (Ridge, 2002).

There is a growing body of literature on the effect of more complex family structures (involving step- and half-relatives) on children's outcomes and their well-being, identifying the added strain in such cases on negotiating relationships and roles within and across households (e.g. parenting responsibilities, sibling relationships, ex- and new partner relationships) (e.g. Case et al, 2001; Brown and Manning, 2009; Stroud, 2015). Messages from the research evidence are complex but, overall, studies suggest that children of separated parents are at increased risk of behavioural problems, poorer educational achievement, health problems and risky health behaviours.

Although identifying the drivers of these increased risks is difficult, key factors are resultant living conditions (lower incomes and poorer quality housing), post-separation parental relationships or parenting approaches (e.g. Wade and Smart, 2002; MacLean, 2004; Teubert and Pinquart, 2010), and post-separation relationships between children and non-resident parents (e.g. Hawthorne et al, 2013; Goisis et al, 2016). Understanding why, even after controlling for these factors, some children are more negatively affected by separation than others is a key research question that could ultimately lead to targeted support for those most vulnerable to negative outcomes of a particular type.

…Separated parenting is different from parenting when parents live together

The experiences of growing up – or parenting – in a separated household are different in a number of key respects from the experiences within families where both parents live together. When families are separated, it is not sufficient (as many studies do) to focus solely (or largely) on the resident parent[2] and their household. Nor is it sufficient (again as many studies do) to assume any resident parent's partner plays a primary 'father figure' (or other parent) role, regardless of their actual relationship to the child.

The data we need on the experiences of living in separated families must take account (at least) of: co-parenting while not living in a parent-couple relationship; step-families; children spending time (or sometimes living equally or near equally) in two separate households; children's relationships – or lack of relationship – with a non-resident parent; and the need for two parents' income to cover (and to some extent to be shared across) two households rather than one. There needs to be a better understanding of how families navigate through more complex family structures including step- and half-relatives, and children's experiences of living (or staying) within more than one household.

…There is a strong call for evidence

Our consultation work highlighted many (often unanswered) questions about the experiences and implications of family separation. These questions are wide-ranging in topic, require in-depth information, and were asked from several different perspectives. Firstly, government departments have different needs:

- The Department for Work and Pensions has evidence needs related to its responsibility for welfare provision for single parent households, couple and post-separation relationship support and the statutory child maintenance system.
- The Ministry of Justice has a focus on families entering the legal system (including mediation) in England and Wales in relation to post-separation negotiations around divorce, financial settlements and child arrangements.
- Departments such as Education and Communities and Local Government also have responsibility for policies in which family separation is a factor.

[2] We use the terms 'resident' and 'non-resident' parents because of their common use in the literature and for want of more nuanced, but recognisable, terminology. However, we recognise the inaccuracies of these terms, given the varied nature of children's living arrangements when parents do not live together, and the growing proportion of children living across both households.

Secondly, research questions from policy and practitioner interest groups span a wide range of foci including child poverty, child welfare, single and non-resident parenthood, family law and family justice, and mental health (both adult and child) as well as relationship support. And, lastly, those working on research related to family separation approach it from a range of substantive research disciplines (including economics, law and socio-legal studies, sociology, demography, social policy, health and psychology).

Data on family separation are needed to augment the substantive knowledge base available for analysis in the short- to longer-term. At the simplest level, we need to be able to describe and document how our society is changing over time in terms of family structures - and how families function within different family arrangements. But beyond this, we need to understand the ways in which family structures affect parent and child trajectories and outcomes in order to inform the development of policy and practice that will maximise their well-being and future life chances. In particular, data are needed to measure the impact and effectiveness of interventions designed to provide separating and separated families with services and support.

The evidence needs we identified can be broadly categorised as:

- An understanding of the factors that lead to separation, and how families' pre-separation lives influence their post-separation lives.
- The implications of separation for parent and child outcomes (sometimes relative to pre-separation and intact family outcomes).
- An understanding of the trajectories that families take post-separation, and the implications of these for parent and child outcomes.
- An understanding of the ways in which policy (changes) and the provision of support affect:
- Outcomes for separated families, irrespective of time since separation.
- Outcomes for newly separated families.
- Families' decisions around separation and propensity to separate, and factors which may influence decisions to separate or not.

And these evidence needs relate to one or more of the following set of broad (inter-related) issues:

- Relationship breakdown and the process of separating.
- Divorce and legal issues relating to separation from marriage and cohabitation.
- Pre- and post-separation relationships and parenting.
- Children's living arrangements post-separation.
- Pre- and post-separation income and finances, and child maintenance post-separation.
- Pre- and post-separation use of services and support needs around relationships, parenting and arrangements post-separation.

…For a number of reasons, the need for data on separated families has increasingly come to the fore

The structure and fluidity of family formation has changed a great deal in the last few decades, with rising numbers of families who never live together, who separate, and who are in

traditionally 'less stable' relationships. So, the need for these data is certainly not new. However, there are several reasons why this issue has become more pressing, and why putting in place a robust data infrastructure now would be invaluable in addressing short- and longer-term questions on family separation:

- There is an increasing recognition of the importance of effective co-parenting among separated families. Measuring the 'involvement' of non-resident parents in terms of financial support and 'contact' has to some extent been superseded by a desire to understand how families function post-separation, and what support might facilitate better co-parenting, including a recognition of the role and/or effects of step-parents and step- and half-siblings. This has resulted in calls for nuanced data on the relevant issues from across the policy, practitioner and research sectors.

- There is a need to evaluate – immediately and into the longer-term – several key policy changes affecting separating and separated families. These include measures to encourage families to make their own post-separation arrangements, rather than use statutory services and the courts; investment in relationship support services; and welfare changes affecting single parents and other low-income families.

4. Why the data we have are insufficient

However, the data we have – and currently plan to collect – fall short of what is required:

…Recent changes to the data infrastructure are likely to exacerbate the unmet need

The reduction in the number of families in contact with statutory and legal services following policy changes encouraging family-based arrangements means a depletion in government administrative data available for understanding the circumstances, and tracking the outcomes, of separating and separated families. As a result, these administrative sources (even in combination) provide nothing like a census of separated families. Rather, the coverage of these sources will necessarily be biased towards those who continue to use statutory and legal services despite the various discouragements to do so, such as higher conflict families and those with continued free access to services, for example due to domestic violence. Currently, evidence about families outside of the legal and statutory systems can only be filled by data collected directly from families, either from surveys or other research.

Moreover, the funding available to many government departments has been reduced, which has affected the availability of funding for primary research. The policy and research communities will therefore be more reliant on data collected in the large, longer-term (largely grant-funded) studies, rather than bespoke research. It is important that these studies collect the data required to meet this need. But a silver lining of the need to rely more on multi-focus studies is that this provides an opportunity to work outside of the silos of particular government departments and academic/research disciplines, to ensure that we gather the kinds of holistic evidence required to understand families' lives and the *combined* impact of the various policies which affect them.

Over recent decades, the large-scale, multi-purpose, longitudinal studies have been the cornerstone of the evidence base on family separation. The cancellation of Life Study (the planned next birth cohort study) will mean a substantial gap in these data for children growing up within the contemporary social and political context.

…Existing 'family' studies often pay insufficient attention to separated families

Despite the high proportion of children living in separated families, the survey data about their lives are often inferior to those for families in which parents live together. The added complexity of family life in separated families tends to be insufficiently reflected in the questions asked and/or who is interviewed as part of the study. There is often a primary focus (in terms of questions and respondents) on the household in which the child is living, with far fewer data collected on, for instance, the parenting roles of the non-resident parent. Very few data are collected about the ways in which family life and relationships are negotiated in separated families (e.g. the dynamics of step-family relationships, how separated parents navigate co-parenting, and so on), or about the lives of non-resident parents and their households. What data there are tend to come from the reports of resident parents, and are not collected directly from non-resident parents, step-relatives or the children and young people themselves. Where studies do attempt to interview non-resident parents and their households, difficulties in achieving representative samples reduce the credibility of the available evidence.

…There is some good cross-sectional evidence on particular issues or sub-groups, but much more limited holistic longitudinal data

Government-funded evaluations and surveys, and qualitative studies, can separately provide depth and breadth. However, they tend to address very specific questions with specific groups, usually those involved in the statutory (e.g. child maintenance) or legal system, or users of particular government, private or third sector support services. So, whilst fit for purpose in terms of their particular aims, they provide only piecemeal evidence for the wider base, and provide limited opportunities to take a more holistic view of separation. They are mostly one-off cross-sectional studies, which mean they provide a snapshot of families at a particular point in time. This restricts our ability to use these data to understand the dynamics of separation and causal pathways.

In particular, families outside the legal or statutory systems often remain invisible to these studies. This will be an increasing issue: with policy and legal changes meaning that fewer separated families will come into contact with 'the system', it is more important than ever that we understand what is happening to those outside it.

Moreover, as these studies are often conducted with a particular policy question in mind, the timing of the data collection can affect the usefulness of the data for future research. Key changes to the welfare, statutory support and legal systems in recent years diminish the value of data collected earlier, and further highlight the need for ensuring a data infrastructure which captures the experiences and outcomes of families within the current regime.

….The existing longitudinal studies tend to provide breadth not depth of information, and have methodological constraints

The best holistic data on separated families are provided by the UK's large-scale longitudinal studies. Moreover, as they track families over time (including sometimes prior to separation) they provide the necessary data to look at the trajectories of families and their resultant outcomes. However, in terms of how far they can reasonably be expected to cater for the full range of evidence needs on family separation, they are limited in three key respects:

- Their multi-purpose nature constrains the amount of data they can reasonably collect specifically related to family separation.
- With the most recent national birth cohort (the Millennium Birth Cohort) in their teens, there are no contemporaneous cohort data on which to draw.
- Sample sizes and attrition among separated families reduce the analytical potential.

The UK's longitudinal data infrastructure includes studies of households (notably the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) followed by the UK Household Longitudinal Study (UKHLS)), as well as smaller panel studies of families such as the former Families and Children Study (FACS)). It also includes a number of birth cohort studies, tracking children and their families from birth. Whilst some are nationwide (e.g. 1946, 1958, 1970 and Millennium Birth cohorts), there are also several regional (e.g. Avon Longitudinal Panel Study of Parents and Children (ALSPAC) and Born in Bradford) and country-specific studies (e.g. Growing Up in Scotland, Longitudinal Study of Young People in England 'Next Steps'). The earlier birth cohorts (1946, 1958 and 1970) provide valuable data on the experiences of family separation during their childhood, but within the context of quite different societal structures and norms, as well as policies. Necessarily they are more limited in their usefulness today (except for exploring the consequences of separation into adulthood, albeit given the then policies). So, the most valuable studies for looking at separation within a (relatively) current context are the UKHLS and the MCS (and, more recently, Next Steps). Each of these studies provides different evidence, which could be usefully triangulated.

Overall, the UKHLS currently provides the most comprehensive longitudinal data on a representative group of UK families with dependent children, providing information on both intact families and those who live separately. It has several attributes which make it a strong dataset for studying family separation: a reasonable sample size of currently separated families; a good range of data on family life pre- and post-separation; and, crucially, the attempted continued collection of data from parents and partners who leave the original household. However, several issues constrain how far the study can be used to address the full range of research questions on family relationships post-separation:

- First, although the study includes a good selection of questions useful for the study of family separation, its multipurpose nature means that it lacks the depth and granularity required – particularly in terms of the experiences of co-parenting, process of separating, transition periods and outcomes. It is not realistic to expect a multi-purpose study of this nature to be able to provide all the evidence required on family separation.

- Secondly, despite its large overall sample size, the number of families who separate each year and at least one parent remains in the study is small (around 100), limiting short-term analysis which relies on pre-separation as well as post-separation data, or analysis of the effects of particular policy changes. Most analyses require data aggregated across multiple years. These small sample sizes are exacerbated by a suspected differential level of drop-out among families who separate.

- Finally, the proportion of non-resident parents who remain in the study post-separation is low, resulting in very small numbers and potential bias among this group.

In contrast, the MCS is arguably the most comprehensive (relatively) up-to-date dataset for studying the outcomes of children experiencing separation during childhood. The study has followed a birth cohort of children born between late 2000 and early 2002, with its primary aim to track their outcomes throughout their lives. As such, it makes a rich dataset for understanding the pathways and outcomes of children who experience separation – with a wide range of outcomes and explanatory variables – with reasonable sample sizes of children experiencing separation at different ages. However, like the UKHLS, a number of issues constrain how far the MCS can be used to address the full range of research questions on family relationships in separating and separated families:

- First, by dint of the birth cohort design, the children are all growing up within the same policy timeframe and the same period of change (e.g. recession, education changes, etc.), making it impossible to disentangle the timings of the separation from other changes over that time. For instance, were we to look at the effect of the recent child maintenance changes on separating families using MCS data, we would be looking at the effect on families with children in their early teens (which may be different from the effect on families with younger or older children).

- Secondly, the MCS does not collect any data from parents who do not live in the child's household. If parents separate, no data are collected from the non-resident parent: all data on the separation and post-separation period come from the resident parent (and, as children get older, the children themselves).

- Thirdly, in general, the data collected on post-separation parenting are limited, restricted largely to questions around contact with minimal information on the quality of relationships and co-parenting.

- Lastly, the children are now in their teens so, for recent or future policy changes, the MCS cannot provide data on their effects on younger children.

5. Barriers to improving the evidence base

However, there is no easy solution to improving the evidence base on separating and separated families:

…Research budgets are tight

Research budgets are tight, with competing priorities for government and grant-funders, particularly for longitudinal studies, which require long-term investment. Government is more likely to concentrate its resources on studies to address immediate policy or intervention questions, rather than investing in new longitudinal data collection. The ESRC is currently evaluating its longitudinal data infrastructure in order to inform its future funding. It is due to report in mid-2018. However, again, it is clear that there are many competing priorities for grant-funders.

…Administrative sources neither provide the depth of data nor capture more than a subset of separated families

Few administrative data sources identify separated parents and those that do focus on specific sub-groups of the population (e.g. single parents within the welfare system; users of the Child Maintenance Service; court users). Moreover, they provide little more than a basic profile of the resident or non-resident parent family along with a small number of objective outcomes around benefit receipt, child maintenance payment/receipt and arrangements made in court. So, while, in the future, it may be possible to link these datasets, this complex and costly task would provide very partial coverage and limited data, largely ruling out their use as stand-alone resources for research into separation. At most, they can valuably supplement survey data collected directly from families.

…The methodological challenges of surveying separated families are substantial

The methodological challenges to collecting robust survey data from separating and separated families are substantial, including:

- There are no available sampling frames by which to identify resident and non-resident parents without large-scale screening. This is both costly and prone to bias: previous attempts to do so resulted in samples which under-represent separated parents, particularly non-resident parents. Only around half the number of non-resident parents self-identify in screening exercises compared to resident parents (e.g. Peacey and Hunt, 2008; UKHLS own analysis).[3]

[3] There are a number of added complications here. Firstly, for families in which children spent substantial – or even equal – amounts of time living with each parent, defining (for survey question purposes) one parent as 'resident' and the other as 'non-resident' can be problematic – and does not necessarily reflect the reality of some shared care arrangements. Secondly, we should not assume that 'family separation' only relates to the separation of natural or adoptive parents. Rather, in some cases, the separation from a social parent (e.g. step-parent) should be a criterion for inclusion in a study on family separation. Thirdly, we recognise that 'separation' is not always a distinct event, and that families can move in and out of being intact or separated, or that 'separating' happens over a period of time.

- Where research questions require data on families pre- and post-separation, the low prevalence of separation (up to two per cent of families with dependent children each year) makes it very difficult to build up an adequate sample size.

- A differentially high attrition rate among separating and separated families in longitudinal studies makes it challenging to retain a representative sample of separated families over time. In particular, it is very hard to retain non-resident parents in studies after separation.

- Capturing new forms of families/parenting requires a substantial amount of new survey question design and piloting. We need to think beyond traditional measures of parenting in stable, two-parent families to how to capture parenting across households, potentially involving step-relatives and other forms of blended families. This is likely to be easier to achieve in a bespoke study which focuses on family relationships.

6. Potential ways of improving the evidence base

In a world of unrestricted budgets, the optimal solution would be to launch a longitudinal study of families with dependent children:

…We need longitudinal data, including data on families before they separate

Understanding families' circumstances prior to, and trajectories towards, separation is essential for a range of research questions around the causes and effects of separation. This requires data from families prior to separation (best collected in real time rather than retrospectively). This would be achieved by starting with a cross-section of all families with dependent children and tracking them over time.[4]

There are different sampling models which could be adopted: one would be a nationally representative sample; another would be a series of local area-based studies, which may be valuable in terms of recruitment and retention, as well as providing the ability to 'boost' particular sub-groups of interest through local recruitment. Under either approach, all the families in the study would be tracked over time. Those families intact at baseline that subsequently separate would – crucially – yield data on both their pre- and post-separation circumstances and outcomes. Those already separated at baseline would yield data over time on post-separation circumstances and outcomes.

… Methodologically and substantively, we need a study which is set up specifically to collect data on parenting and family life and its wider effects

A longitudinal study with a specific focus on families could devote all of its interview time on relevant data collection, and facilitate 'offshoot' studies (qualitative or quantitative) to look at particular groups or issues.

[4] An alternative model would be a cohort study with perhaps three cohorts of children starting at different ages (e.g. birth, age 5 and age 9).

We might expect that recruiting parents into a study when the family is intact, and retaining them in the study post-separation, would be more successful than recruiting both parents into a study at a time after they have already separated. However, this has not been tested within the context of a study promoted as being about family relationships.[5] It can also be designed to focus on issues around step-families and other forms of complex blended families.

…However, the costs of such a study would be high if the primary focus of the study were family separation

Given a separation rate of around two per cent per year, the data collection costs per separated family would be very high relative to the number of families for which pre- and post-separation data would be collected. In our view, the costs would be unlikely to be justifiable unless there were a strong call for the additional data on both two-parent as well as one-parent families included in the study. That is, there would need to be a call for a longitudinal study of families above and beyond what is provided by the existing longitudinal studies.

The two main features of the design that would drive the costs are:

- *Sample size*. Our view is that a longitudinal survey dedicated to separation would need to start with an achieved sample size of around 28,000 families of whom around 20,000 will be intact at Wave 1.[6] A sample of this size would yield (if parents could be retained within the study) around 300 to 400 separations per year, which would be large enough for reasonable analysis of this group year on year, but would crucially allow for detailed analysis with just a small number of years of accumulated data.

- *Interview mode.* It is probable that much of the interviewing for the study, including all the interviews with intact families, would need to be carried out face-to-face. The need to identify which families in the study had separated wave on wave might make the use of cheaper modes (such as postal, online and telephone) problematic as such modes might increase non-response amongst those that had recently separated.[7]

In such a study we estimate that in Wave 1 around 98 per cent of the data collection (and hence around 98 per cent of the costs) would be with families who were either intact (70 per cent) or had separated earlier than a year ago (28 per cent). Just two per cent would be with newly separated families. Assuming an 80 per cent response rate at each wave post baseline, by Year 5 a starting sample of 20,000 intact families would have generated at least one year of data on around 1,300 separating families.

[5] The retention strategies in the UKHLS for separated parents mirrors all 'household leavers', rather than focusing specifically on the importance of retaining parents in a study on family life. The UKHLS has struggled to retain non-resident parents in the waves post-separation. Most child- or family-focused longitudinal studies in the UK have not attempted to interview parents once they leave the child's household (e.g. Families and Children Study, MCS).

[6] A family is defined as one in which there is one or more biological, adoptive or step-parent or one or more dependent-aged child.

[7] Alternative (cheaper) modes may be possible for separated families, once their commitment to the study post-separation is established.

A more realistic – but still valuable – solution would be to bolster existing studies as much as possible *and* launch a longitudinal study of separating and separated families:

…A longitudinal study which tracks families post-separation can provide a wealth of data

A considerably less expensive option would be to set up a longitudinal study that starts, at baseline, with a sample of *currently separated* families (irrespective of when they separated), plus a boost sample of the newly separated (who would otherwise be only a small percentage of the whole baseline sample). Such a study would provide very useful data on a cross-sectional sample of separated families, and would address a large number of the evidence gaps. Over time, the study would generate data on trajectories and outcomes for separated families. The boost of the newly separated would enable tracking of trajectories from soon after the separation. A comparison sample of intact families would allow for differences between separated and intact families to be studied.

…There would be methodological challenges in setting up and sustaining a longitudinal study of separated families

Setting up a study that starts with samples of currently and newly separated families is not straightforward, but it is feasible. The currently separated families could, in principle, be recruited via a doorstep screen of a random sample of addresses, but asking about separation on the doorstep is likely to be difficult. A better option might be to recruit a sample via another large-scale, and high quality, household survey, such as the ONS Annual Population Survey or the Crime Survey for England and Wales.

Identifying a reasonably sized sample of the newly separated is potentially more difficult. To generate a sample of newly separated resident parents would require some means of screening a sample of the general population of households – with the expectation that only around 0.6 per cent of all households[8] would be screened in as eligible. One option would be to recruit via a *very* large population survey, such as the ONS Annual Population Survey (which interviews 170,000 households per year).[9] Failing this, it might prove necessary to recruit via a large-scale omnibus survey. The larger versions of the latter surveys are not based on probability samples,[10] but they do have the advantage of very large numbers.

To gain buy-in to the study, a face-to-face interview would likely be needed, and the longer interview allowed via this mode would also give the opportunity to ask detailed questions about the family history. After the first interview, it might prove possible to move to cheaper data collection modes as long as high response rates could be maintained.

[8] Allowing for the fact that under a third of all households are families with dependent children, and less than three per cent of these will have recently separated.
[9] The largest component of the APS is the Labour Force Survey, which has a one-year longitudinal element for addresses. This might be a help in identifying the newly separated.
[10] The sampling is based on filling quotas rather than being strict random sampling and there is an associated higher risk of bias.

As with the first design, ideally the study would aim to interview both the resident and non-resident parents within the recruited families. Different methods for recruiting parents would need to be trialled, including recruiting both engaging representative samples of resident and non-resident parents into the study and attempting to recruit the other parent via the recruited one. Again, this is largely uncharted territory, in the context of a large-scale survey. We might expect it to be more difficult to recruit non-resident parents in this way than to recruit them whilst the family is intact.

…We would continue to rely on existing longitudinal studies for analysis requiring data collected prior to separation

This design would not allow the collection of 'real-time' data on families prior to the separation, so the relationship between pre-and post-separation circumstances would not be captured, beyond any information that could be collected from parents retrospectively. Questions that rely on (non-retrospective) pre- and post-separation data would need to be addressed, as now, using the UKHLS or MCS. For this reason, we believe that if this design were to be funded, the option of including a few extra questions to the UKHLS would also need to be pursued.

…There may be potential to make quite modest changes to the UKHLS

If it were possible to add a small number of key questions on post-separation parenting to the UKHLS, it would significantly improve the capacity to address research questions that require pre-separation data when used in conjunction with (the somewhat richer) pre-separation data already collected as part of study. Although there is only very limited potential for adding questions, due to the competing calls on the UKHLS interview time, the UKHLS team is considering the benefits of doing so.

There would also be benefit in exploiting the UKHLS's ability to identify major life events or transitions between waves, notably the point of separation. This would provide an opportunity to ask families an additional module of questions (perhaps as an additional interview supported through the UKHLS Associated Studies scheme) that captured recent or real-time data on these life changes, which are rarely if ever captured in surveys.

…So, in summary, our key options for enhancing the data on family separation are

Options	Advantages	Disadvantages
Enhancing the UKHLS	Makes optimal use of existing longitudinal studies; less expensive than setting up a new longitudinal study.	Limited space to add new questions; small number of separations per year.
New longitudinal study of families with dependent children	The ideal vehicle for tracking families pre- and post-separation; a larger sample size of families than the UKHLS would increase the number of separations per year; new strategies for reducing attrition after separation could be trialled.	Extremely expensive model; considerable methodological issues to overcome before success of recruitment and retention post-separation could be guaranteed.
New longitudinal study of separated families	Would allow for outcomes post-separation to be tracked using a bespoke questionnaire.	Expensive to set up and maintain; considerable methodological issues to overcome before success of recruitment of retention could be guaranteed; not clear how non-resident parents would be identified and recruited.

7. Recommended next steps

Our recommendation, as a first step, is to see how far it is possible to overcome the difficulties inherent in the post-separation study design by conducting a substantial two-wave feasibility and pilot study. This would also fulfil several short-term evidence needs:

…Methodological testing is required before we can justify the cost of a new longitudinal survey

For both of the designs described above (a longitudinal survey of all families or a longitudinal survey of separated families), there are several methodological issues that would make committing to one or the other a high-risk strategy. First and foremost, both of the designs would ideally include non-resident parents in the sample, yet no survey to date has successfully identified and recruited a representative sample of this group. Secondly, a particular concern for a longitudinal survey about separation is that families who separate are thought to be some

of the hardest families to retain over time. This is partly because separation, and re-partnering, can trigger a house move as well as changes to phone numbers (both landlines and mobiles) and email addresses, and changes to surnames; but also because the experience of separation may itself make parents less likely to find the time to participate in research. For a longitudinal survey of the currently separated, the primary issue would be retention after the separation; for a broader longitudinal survey of families with children, the primary issue would be retention both during and after a separation.

Given the costs of a new longitudinal study, coupled with the methodological issues and risks, our belief is that the best *first step* would be to set up a modest-scale survey of currently separated families (with a boost of newly separated families) with commitment to *one* wave of follow-up. That is, each family would be interviewed twice – although consent for future follow-ups would be collected. In terms of sample size, we suggest that it would be adequate to undertake a two-wave study that starts with around 500 currently separated families and 250 recently separated. There is a rationale for also including a comparison group of, say, around 250 intact families to explore differences between separated and intact families.

….Such a study would provide valuable detailed data on the experiences and short-term trajectories of separated families

This initial pilot study would have two key aims:

- To test the feasibility of recruiting (to wave 1) and retaining (in wave 2) separated families, particularly non-resident parents, thereby adding to the body of methodological evidence in this area.

- To provide data to address (and be publicly available for analysis) a number of current information needs on separated families, which can be addressed using cross-sectional data. The one-year follow-up would provide some data on short-term changes in family circumstances, with the primary interest being those who were newly separated at baseline.

The study would recruit *separate* samples of resident and non-resident parents, employing methods to maximise the representativeness of these two (unrelated) samples. It would then be possible to test the feasibility of recruiting the other parent into the study, via the first parent, in order to provide the matched data required to provide a holistic picture of the experiences and outcomes of separated families.

Such a study would be extremely valuable to the policy, practitioner, and research worlds. Within a relatively short timeframe, it would provide very valuable, up-to-date nuanced data on the profile, circumstances and experiences of separating and separated families, reflecting a number of recent policy changes. And, if successful, it would provide a tested design (in terms of sampling, recruitment and survey questions) for a larger-scale, longitudinal study which would become the bedrock of the future data infrastructure on family separation.

1 Introduction

1.1 Overview

While family separation[11] is common in the UK, affecting one in three children, our understanding of its correlates and consequences is limited: the available data are often piecemeal and sometimes outdated. Policy makers, interest groups, researchers and practitioners across disciplines have to 'make do' when trying to understand the lives of separating and separated families and the impact of government policies. Limitations of the existing data infrastructure – taking account of research studies, surveys and administrative sources – preclude a holistic view of how both separation and policy affect families and individuals across various socio-emotional and financial dimensions.

There are a number of challenges to improving the data infrastructure, primarily the costs involved and difficulties in overcoming a range of methodological difficulties inherent in research with separating and separated families. So, with funding from the Nuffield Foundation, we have attempted to assess the *extent* of the issue and suggest possible ways of addressing the shortcomings. We have assessed where and how far the current research and administrative data infrastructure in the UK *can* provide the necessary evidence on separating and separated families. And we have identified three potential routes to *improving* the data infrastructure (all involving new survey data collection).

In our view, each of these routes *would* (in different ways) provide the necessary 'future-proof' data infrastructure to address not only current – but also (foreseeable) future – evidence needs. However, there is no doubt that each would require a large investment of time and resources. We would not advise embarking on any of these without stronger evidence on the feasibility of overcoming some of the methodological challenges involved in achieving robust data, over time, from a representative sample of separated families.

So, in the immediate term, we conclude that the next step in strengthening the data infrastructure on family separation should be a suite of work which will both *test* how best to overcome some of the methodological challenges hindering research with separating and separated families and provide some valuable *substantive data* in the short- to medium-term.

1.2 Report structure

The study was designed to address the following three broad questions:

1. What do the research, policy and practitioner communities need to know about the lives of separating and separated families with dependent children in the UK?
2. How far can the administrative, survey and other research data that currently exist or are in the process of being developed address these evidence needs?

[11] By 'separation', we refer to families where the child does not live with both their parents, with no assumption that they ever did so.

3. What additional data are required, and how would these best be collected? In particular, how far can this be supported by existing longitudinal studies (e.g. the UK Household Longitudinal Survey (the UKHLS))[12] or might a new survey be necessary?

The study involved wide-ranging desk research as well as one-to-one conversations and group consultations across government, academia and the third sector – with those who have both methodological and substantive interests in the issues (see Section 1.5 for more detail on methods). We have structured this report so that it follows the process we took during the study:

- What did people tell us they needed to know about families' experiences of and outcomes of separating and separation? (Section 2)
- Taking account of the evidence needs, what kinds of data did we conclude were needed? (Section 3)
- What kinds of data are currently available on family separation?[13] (Section 4)
- How far do these data meet people's evidence needs? (Section 5)
- How could we best fill the evidence gaps? (Section 6)
- Where next: what should the next steps be in improving the data infrastructure on family separation? (Section 7)

In this first section, we begin by setting out our stall. We articulate *why* it is important to understand the experiences and outcomes of separating and separated families (Section 1.3) and why it is particularly important *at this point in time* to ensure there are good UK data to do this (Section 1.4). Section 1.5 outlines the study stages and the methodologies we employed.

1.3 Why is it important to understand the lives of separating and separated families with dependent children?

1.3.1 'Family' provides a bedrock within our society

Within our society, families provide – or are expected to provide - a bedrock on which we rely throughout the life course. There is a wealth of evidence on the importance of 'family' – or, more specifically, the relationships between parents and children – across the life course, which widely spans academic disciplines and policy areas. Research from both psychology and health makes clear the effects of parenting styles and parental attachment on many child outcomes that extend into adulthood (e.g. Dozier et al, 2008). The sociology and demography literatures highlight links between family structure, and the fluidity of those structures, and the life chances of both parents and children (e.g. Clarke-Stewart and Brentano, 2007). The financial interdependency of families, both within and across households, is a key focus of

[12] When the study started, we expected to review how far Life Study might support any data collection on family separation, in conjunction with the UKHLS. The cancellation of Life Study means that the only viable existing route to enhancing the UK-wide data infrastructure for a contemporary cohort of families is the UKHLS. The Millennium Cohort Study cohort are now in their later teens so there is little scope to add to that study now, apart from potentially adding outcomes for children as they enter adulthood.

[13] Our primary focus was the quantitative data available.

economists and those interested in the link between income and life chances (Duncan et al, 1998). Gerontologists articulate the role of the parent-child relationship in older age, with current debates focusing on both the support roles that older people play for their adult children (for instance, providing informal childcare (e.g. Bryson et al, 2012) and financial gift-giving) (Albertini et al, 2007) and the support that they themselves require (Bonsang, 2009).

Moreover, policy-making and service design are often based on implicit or explicit assumptions about the roles of families. Indeed, the current government's 'Family Test' seeks to recognise the potential impact of any new policy on 'the family' (Abreu, 2017)). The welfare, and to a lesser extent tax, systems assume a financial interdependency between household members. The law provides couples (although sometimes only married couples) with financial and decision-making rights. Parents, whether or not they live with their children, have responsibilities towards them. And among separated families, parents are legally required to support their children financially.

Given the centrality of the 'family' to the healthy functioning of our society and to the wellbeing of individuals within them, it is essential that we have data to understand 'families', how they and the individuals within them are affected by policy and practice, and the outcomes for families and individuals who follow varying trajectories. To do this, our datasets – whether administrative or research-led – must capture 'families' in their broadest forms and be unconstrained by increasingly anachronistic assumptions about family structures. However, our current evidence base is much stronger on more 'traditional' family structures, and less strong in terms of those which emerge through family separation. Although research studies increasingly recognise the need to reflect more diverse family structures than couples who are the biological parents of their children, data collected about other family types often remain limited. The focus continues to be on the household in which the children live, with non-resident parent families treated as 'secondary' (with data on them often collected by proxy from the resident parent). Moreover, the 'separated family'[14] is too often regarded as being just the separated parents and their children, with insufficient regard for the step-relatives who contribute to how the families function and to the outcomes that result. Administrative data, in particular, have very limited ability to identify more complex family structures. All in all, in order to strengthen the evidence base on families we need more carefully to reflect on how we approach data collection on family separation.

1.3.2 Family separation affects millions of families and children

The absolute number – and proportion – of families and children experiencing separation is substantial. Family separation affects one in three British children during their childhood (OECD, 2013)[15] with around two per cent of families with dependent children separating each year (UKHLS, McKay own analysis). In 2013 alone, 95,000 dependent children in England and Wales experienced parental divorce (21 per cent of whom were under five, and 64 per cent were under 11) (ONS, 2015a), with survey estimates suggesting that similar numbers of

[14] By 'separation' we refer to families in which the child does not live with both their parents, with no assumption that they ever did so. Our focus is on situations where the child lives with one parent (for most of the time) or in an equal shared care arrangement. Situations where a child is living apart from their parents due to state intervention from social services or other reasons are outside of the scope of our study.

[15] Four in ten children experience lone parenthood during their childhood (DWP, 2015).

children experience the split of a cohabitation (Benson, 2013). Additionally, a significant minority of fathers do not live with the mother during pregnancy and at the time of the birth, for which an approximation can be gleaned from birth registration statistics. Data for 2012 show that 16.2 per cent of fathers were not living with the mother at the time of the registration of the birth, comprising 10.6 per cent where the father jointly registered the birth and 5.7 per cent where the mother registered the baby on her own (ONS, 2016).

At any one time, around 2.5 million separated families in the UK are raising over four million dependent children (Punton-Li et al 2012). Three million children are living in single parent households (26 per cent of dependent children), and a further one million live with step-parents (nine per cent) (ONS, 2014).

Although *currently* most separated parents were previously married, a decline in marriage rates and an increase in cohabitation rates (Perelli-Harris et al, 2010) mean that this balance is likely to change, especially as cohabiting relationships (when they do not result in marriage) are, on average, more fragile than marriages (Kiernan and Mensah, 2010).

1.3.3 Family separation can be associated with poorer outcomes for children

Separation is a significant life event that carries an increased risk of negative consequences and poorer life chances for both parents and children (e.g. Amato, 2005; Amato and Cheadle, 2005; Mooney et al, 2009; Goisis et al, 2016). For many children, family break-up brings social and emotional instability coupled with financial disadvantage that can impact on all areas of their lives, from the economic and material to deeply felt social and emotional insecurity (Ridge, 2002). Messages from the research evidence are complex, but overall, studies suggest that children of separated parents are at increased risk of behavioural problems, poorer educational achievement, health problems and risky health behaviours.[16]

Although identifying the drivers of these increased risks is sometimes difficult, key factors are: resultant living conditions (low incomes and poor quality housing); pre- and post-separation parental relationships (including conflict and violence) or parenting approaches (e.g. Wade and Smart 2002; MacLean 2004; Teubert and Pinquart, 2010); and post-separation relationships between children and non-resident parents (e.g. Hawthorne et al 2003; Avison, 2010; Goisis et al, 2016). Lamb (2002) points to five key factors that predict children's life chances after their parents' separation:

- The quality of the relationship with their mother;
- The quality of the relationship with their father;
- How much conflict there is between parents (see also, Amato et al, 2009);
- The financial support available to children and parents with care;
- The child's individual temperament.

[16] The evidence points to the negative consequences of conflict in both intact and separated families, with a growing interest in parental relationships and parenting in all families, regardless of whether parents are living together. However, the UK data infrastructure is much better served to address questions around the impact of these issues in intact families, with the paucity of data particularly around post-separation parenting and relationships.

The Chief Medical Officer's report (2013) highlights the importance of childhood to future health, and recommends the need to strengthen the evidence base to promote socio-emotional well-being and build resilience. There is also a body of evidence about the consequences of separation on parents, not only on their financial circumstances but also on their mental health and well-being (e.g. Brewer and Nandi, 2014).

1.3.4 Separated parenting is different from parenting in families where both parents live together

The experiences of growing up – or parenting – in a separated household are different in a number of key respects from the experiences within families where both parents live together. When families are separated, it is not sufficient (as many studies do) for research examining those families to focus solely (or largely) on the resident parent[17] and their household. Nor it is sufficient (again, as many studies do) to assume that the resident parent's partner plays the primary 'father figure' (or other parent) role. The data we need on the experiences of living in separated families must take account (at least) of the following: co-parenting while not in a parent-couple relationship; step-families; children spending time (or sometimes living) in two separate households; children's relationships – or lack of relationship – with a non-resident parent; and the need for the two parents' incomes to stretch to support two households rather than one.

In brief, the UK profile of separated families is as follows:[18]

- Most children in separated families primarily live with one parent; only a minority have shared residency arrangements (Haux et al, forthcoming). Most commonly, the mother is the resident parent, with only 10 per cent of lone parents being fathers (ONS, 2015b).
- Four in ten children have at least weekly contact with their non-resident parent but a third have no contact at all, according to resident parent reports (UKHLS wave 5, McKay own analysis). Levels of contact fall in line with time since the family separated (Bryson et al, 2013; Goisis et al, 2016).
- A third of children regularly stay overnight with their non-resident parent (UKHLS wave 6, resident parent report). The proportion increases with age (Haux et al, 2015).
- While we understand that children in separated families fare best when their parents effectively co-parent and minimise the conflict that children experience, we actually know very little about post-separation parenting. We have a very limited understanding of the parenting principles and values that separated parents adopt (and to what extent, if any, they differ from intact couple parenting), and how they navigate parenting post-separation. What we do know is that:

[17] We use the terms 'resident' and 'non-resident' parents because of their common use in the literature and for want of more nuanced, but recognisable, terminology. By 'resident' we refer to the parent with whom the child lives for most of the time, given the prevailing model that a child has a primary carer. However, we recognise the inaccuracies of these terms, given the varied nature of children's living arrangements when parents do not live together, and the growing proportion of children living across both households. Also, given the very large majority of resident parents are mothers, we refer to resident parents as female and non-resident parents as male, again recognising the inaccuracy of this in a minority of cases.

[18] We provide more detail on each of these issues in Section 5, where we review the current evidence.

    - Fewer than one in five (18 per cent) resident parents report making joint decisions with non-resident parents about important aspects of their child's life (UKHLS wave 5).
    - There is some evidence that levels of paternal involvement post-separation are increasing, and that fathers' pre-separation involvement predicts their post-separation involvement (Amato et al, 2009; Westphal et al, 2014; Haux et al, 2015).
- Many families – most often resident parent households – experience a substantial reduction in living standards and/or a drop into poverty post-separation. Using data from the British Household Panel Study (BHPS), Brewer and Nandi (2014) found that up to one in five resident parents fell into poverty after separation. Especially where pre-separation incomes were higher, spousal support, child maintenance and welfare benefits did not compensate for the loss of one parent's income from the household.
- Far fewer data are available on the financial circumstances of the non-resident parent post-separation. However, as a group, they are more likely than other parents to be unemployed or economically inactive, living in rented accommodation and belonging to the lowest socio-economic group (Poole et al, 2013).
- While child maintenance is designed to redistribute a proportion of the non-resident parent's income to the resident parent to help towards the costs of raising a child, these obligations are often not met. Despite nearly all non-resident parents being legally obliged to pay child maintenance, in 2011/12, fewer than half – 43 per cent – of separated families had any kind of arrangement in place for the non-resident parent to pay maintenance. Moreover, non-compliance by some non-resident parents meant that fewer than four in ten – 37 per cent – resident parents *received* any maintenance, and fewer still – 31 per cent – received the full amount agreed (UKHLS, wave 3).
- The reasons why so many non-resident parents fail to pay child maintenance are only partially understood. Cross-sectional statistics show positive associations between frequency of contact and maintenance payments (e.g. Wikeley et al, 2008; Maplethorpe et al, 2008). We know that both contact and maintenance tend to tail off as the length of time since separation increases (e.g. Bryson et al, 2013). There is some, limited, evidence using longitudinal survey data of the interaction of parents' decision-making around financial support and contact arrangements (Ermisch, 2008) and of the effect of non-resident parents moving in with new partners on their propensity to pay child maintenance (Ermisch and Pronzato, 2008).

1.4 Why have discussions on the importance of good data on separated families come to the fore?

The need for data on separated families is certainly not new. However, arguably, there are several reasons why this issue has currently come to the fore, and why putting in place a robust data infrastructure now would be invaluable in addressing short- and longer-term questions on family separation. These points are not only pertinent currently: they all have long-term implications for the types of data we need.

- Fewer families in contact with statutory and legal services means a reduction in government administrative data available for understanding the circumstances, and

tracking the outcomes, of separating and separated families. These evidence gaps can only be filled by *survey* – or other research – data collected directly from families.

- Over recent decades, the large-scale, multi-purpose, longitudinal studies have been the cornerstone of the evidence base on family separation. The cancellation of Life Study (the planned new UK birth cohort study) will mean a substantial gap in these data for the children growing up within the contemporary social and policy context.

- An overall reduction in government funding (which looks set to continue) means that government can afford to fund less research. Where administrative data on those using statutory or legal systems (increasingly) cannot provide the evidence, it will therefore be more reliant on data collected in externally-funded, large, longer-term studies or routinely collected data. It is important that these studies collect the data required to meet this need.[19]

- In the past, governments have largely attempted separate policy solutions for the various issues affecting separating and separated families, with responsibilities split across departments (e.g. in England and Wales[20] the Ministry of Justice (MoJ), the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), Department for Education (DfE), Department of Health (DH)), with a patchwork of policies emerging over time. While in more recent years, government has started to recognise the need to take a more holistic approach to family policy (e.g. the DWP Family Stability Review, 2012), departmental cross-over between emerging family policies are still limited. For instance, although sharing a common purpose of 'empowering' families to negotiate post-separation arrangements and reducing state and legal support, the MoJ and DWP are taking forward policies relating to different aspects of the separation process (DWP, 2012; MoJ, 2011). It is important to provide evidence that reflects families' *experiences* of separation, cutting across the legal and policy boundaries. We need data to enable holistic research on family separation to happen outside these silos.

- As articulated above, there is an increasing recognition of the importance of effective co-parenting among separated families: a previous approach of measuring the 'involvement' of non-resident parents in terms of financial support and 'contact' has been superseded, with a greater appetite for understanding how families function post-separation, and what support might facilitate better co-parenting. A policy example is the DWP's Help and Support for Separated Families Innovation Projects (Thomas et al, 2016) which sought to

[19] One advantage of the need to rely more on multi-focus studies is that this provides an opportunity to work outside of the silos of particular government departments and academic/research disciplines to ensure that we gather the kinds of holistic evidence required to understand families' lives and the combined impact of the various policies which affect them.

[20] Whilst certain key matters, such as child support, are dealt with essentially on a UK-wide basis, important aspects of family law and policy differ amongst the constituent parts of the UK. Notably, the laws in Scotland relating to divorce, financial remedies between adults on family breakdown and living arrangements for children are (and always have been) distinct from those in England and Wales and (separately, and with some differences of detail from the English position) Northern Ireland. Legislation and policy development in such areas are dealt with locally, whilst UK-wide matters are dealt with in Westminster. Most of the detailed discussion that follows pertains particularly to the situation in England and Wales.

test ways to support post-separation parenting through a range of legal, therapeutic and third sector services. The call for *nuanced* data on the issues has increased – and is likely to continue to do so – from across the sectors.

While the issues above point to the need to develop a robust data infrastructure into the longer term, current policy is at a crossroads in a number of the policy areas affecting family separation (both UK-wide and in England and Wales, in particular), making robust survey data about family separation important *now*. The effect of new and forthcoming policy changes must be captured, which means gathering data across the full breadth of outcomes, rather than in a piecemeal process tied to different government departments' areas of activity.

In particular, we need to understand how arrangements for children are made in this changed environment and what these arrangements mean in practice for families in different circumstances (socio-economic, psychological, and relational). More fundamentally, in a world where parents are now expected to make their own arrangements post-separation, we need to know much more about how and why parents make the decisions they do about post-separation parenting, how and why these arrangements are either sustained or change, and how they affect parents' and children's socio-emotional, educational and health outcomes. Evidence of the (positive or negative) impacts of particular support services or policies is required in order to ensure that families receive the help they need and thereby minimise any negative effects of family separation.

The key policy issues are:

Shift away from state/court involvement in family separation to family-based arrangements

As the two government departments primarily responsible for issues related to family separation, the DWP[21] and the MoJ have introduced a number of policies aimed at reducing the role of (and cost to) the state. By financially disincentivising use of the statutory services or courts and/or offering alternative advisory, mediation or therapeutic routes, they encourage families to negotiate and navigate their own post-separation arrangements around parenting and financial support. The government's stance is now that 'the state should only get involved when parents cannot come to an agreement themselves or when they try to evade their responsibilities'. This stands in quite stark contrast to the role that the state had previously held, for example in setting rates for and collecting child maintenance payments. A rationale is given that getting parents to make their own arrangements will lead to more amicable relationships between them, as well as reducing the cost to the state of intervention.[22]

The key changes in this area are:

- The closure of the former statutory child maintenance system, the Child Support Agency (CSA) and all its cases, with the introduction of the new Child Maintenance Service (CMS) which places an emphasis on parents coming to private 'family-based' arrangements. Where families are unable to make their own arrangement, they can set up a Direct Pay arrangement (where the non-resident parent pays the agreed amount directly to the

[21] The DWP's policy activity and connected legislation applies across the UK, so – for example – the child support reforms apply equally in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

[22] These assumptions are largely made on the basis of evidence showing the non-causal association between good relationships and effective arrangements.

resident parent, but within the CMS system) or, if it can be shown that the non-resident parent will not adhere to this agreement, a Collect and Pay arrangement can be set up, where the CMS collects the money due and passes it to the resident parent. There is an administrative fee to using the CMS, with the Collect and Pay system attracting an additional percentage payment (based on the child maintenance calculation) from both resident and non-resident parents. As a result, it is expected that fewer separating and separated families will use the statutory system and – as a result – be 'invisible' in government administrative datasets.

- In England and Wales, Mediation Information and Assessment Meetings (MIAMs) are (in theory) compulsory for all parents considering using the court to settle their financial or parenting disputes.
- The removal of Legal Aid in England and Wales[23] for most private family law cases means that the State is not supporting parents to use the court system, and so they must fund it or represent themselves.

Shifting ethos around parenting after separation

- There has been a shift in dialogue around expectations of parents' roles post-separation. Parenting itself has received more attention, with shared parental leave, proposals for compulsory joint birth registration and an increase in relationship support, all indicating the expectation that both parents are involved in their child's life and that sometimes couples will need support. Non-resident parents are increasingly expected to play an active role in children's lives post-separation, beyond their financial obligations, and some support is being put in place for this (e.g. DWP's Help and Support for Separated Families).
- The key legislation echoing this shift in expectations about post-separation parenting in England and Wales is the Children and Families Act 2014. This directs courts to presume, unless the contrary is shown, that involvement[24] of each parent in the life of the child will further the child's welfare. Legal terminology has been changed to reflect these more equal roles with 'contact' and 'residence orders' being replaced by 'child arrangement orders' and 'parents with care' and 'non-resident parents' being replaced in the child maintenance context with 'paying' and 'receiving' parents.[25]

Welfare changes

Wider changes to tax and benefits system for all parents are likely to disadvantage separated families:

- The introduction of a small marriage tax allowance;
- Reduced or no eligibility to receive Child Benefit based on *one* parent's income (which, in single parent households, means households with someone earning more than £50,000 start to lose Child Benefit);

[23] Contrast the rather less fundamental restrictions on the availability of legal aid in Scotland effected through changes to the Civil Legal Aid (Scotland) Regulations 2002 from 2011 onwards.

[24] Note, 'involvement' does not denote any particular division of a child's time.

[25] Given high levels of non-payment, we view this terminology as similarly inadequate and therefore we use resident parent and non-resident parent in this report. For ease of drafting and reading, we also use the more familiar terminology of 'contact' and 'residence' (also used in the Children (Scotland) Act 1995, section 11) instead of the more cumbersome technical language associated with the new child arrangements orders in England and Wales.

- Universal Credit changes, including greater expectations of the type and hours of work to be considered and less generous rates than its tax credits predecessor;
- Housing Benefit and Council Tax benefit reductions;
- Removal of the Spare Room Subsidy (or, the 'bedroom tax');
- Overall benefit cap put in place (£500/week), reducing to £385/week in 2017, outside London;
- Crisis loans and Job Grant payments effectively abolished.

Specific changes to benefit eligibility for resident parents, with the impetus that 600,000 lone parents will be better off under a system that will incentivise work and make work pay include:

- Lone Parent Obligations lowered so that lone parents of three- and four-year olds are now expected to be job-seeking;
- A switch to the Work Programme after 12 months out of work.

1.5 Study methodology

The study involved four interlinked stages, each involving an iterative process of consultation and desk-based review.

Stage 1: What do we need to know?

This first stage involved compiling and articulating the full range of evidence needs raised by policy makers, interest groups, researchers and practitioners. These needs were cross-policy, cross-departmental and cross-discipline, concerning current and planned policies as well as wider (future-proof) questions about the lives of separated families which go beyond immediate policy bounds. The research team developed and populated an 'information needs' framework, that spans policies and disciplines and identifies cross-cutting themes and issues. It then convened two workshops, involving stakeholders from within government, academia, research, policy interest and practitioner groups, to invite an open and broad-reaching discussion of the data needs around family-separation. Since then additional consultation in various within- and between-discipline seminars, as well as individual discussions, have fed into our final compilation.

Although the final framework is set within the policy context, it tries to take account of the wider landscape around family formation and separation and to 'join up the dots' between the different information needs across policy and disciplines. In Section 2 of this report, we attempt to distil these information needs into key themes.[26]

Stage 2: What can we learn from the existing evidence?

The study's second stage assessed how far current or planned data sources either *have* answered (recently, in an up-to-date policy context) or *could* answer some or all of the research questions identified in Stage 1 (and how far they could provide a holistic rather than piecemeal picture). By mapping what evidence is needed (Stage 1) alongside the evidence that is and will

[26] The full compilation of research questions is available from the authors on request.

be available, we are able to report on how far the current data infrastructure on family separation is fit for purpose.

We have identified key research studies and administrative data that address any of the research questions, mapping the broad data that are collected and the methodologies employed. Because of our dual foci on (a) holistic evidence and (b) the current and future data infrastructure, rather than historical data, we have looked in particular at the UKHLS (the large-scale UK longitudinal panel survey) and the birth cohorts. As well as assessing what data these can currently provide, we have also explored with the UKHLS team the potential to add to that study in order to enhance the data on family separation. These discussions form the basis of our proposals for new data collection in Chapter 6. We have consulted with various government departments about research they have recently undertaken or plan to undertake, to ensure we have a full picture, and we have talked to government departments and the Administrative Data Linkage Service about relevant administrative data. We have also fed into consultation calls (e.g. the Child and Young People Mental Health Survey and the Millennium Cohort Study) about the future content, proposing the collection of key data on the experiences and outcomes of children and young people in separating and separated households.

Section 4 summarises our work on Stage 2.[27] This has been a methodological exercise assessing the strength of the evidence based on the design, sample population, content and timeframe of the studies. We have *not* conducted an evidence review, in which we attempt to summarise findings from the research undertaken with these data. And where we have identified as yet unanalysed data, we have not undertaken secondary analysis of these.

As part of this stage, we have worked with the CLOSER Discovery team at University College London who are developing an online resource that enables researchers to search and explore the data from eight leading UK longitudinal studies including the MCS and the UKHLS.[28] We have identified questions which have been asked which relate to family separation, in order to facilitate their easy access for other researchers. At the time of publication, this work is ongoing, and will develop over time. Please see Appendix A for details current at the time of publication.

Clearly, the full body of research on various elements of family separation is vast. We have therefore restricted ourselves to reporting on *key* data sources and those that provide the most *up-to-date* data on any particular issues. Moreover, in order to place some parameters around the scope of the study, we have focused largely on *quantitative* rather than qualitative data. The exception to this is where qualitative studies provide the primary evidence in a particular research area. Certainly there is a need for good quality qualitative evidence on various aspects of family separation. However, in our assessment (and those of others), there are fewer methodological and cost barriers to qualitative studies. So, while we discuss the role of qualitative research in Section 3 (where the research questions might best be addressed in this way), and incorporated the potential to embed qualitative work within our proposed new

[27] To inform this stage, we produced summaries of the methodologies of a range of the studies cited in this report. These are available from the authors on request.
[28] http://www.closer.ac.uk/data-resources/closer-search-platform/.

survey designs, we have not systematically included them within our review of the current research.

Stage 3: How might we fill the evidence gaps?

Our work in Stage 2 identified a number of shortcomings in the evidence available from the current, and foreseeable, data infrastructure. As well as identifying some gaps that could be filled with relatively small or ad hoc pieces of work, it concluded that a number of the key gaps could only be addressed through additional longitudinal survey data. During Stage 3, we explored further with the UKHLS team how we might enhance the data collection on separating and separated families to address some of these evidence needs. We also identified two potential longitudinal survey designs – one of families with dependent children and another of *separated* families with dependent children – that could more fully address the gaps in the data infrastructure.

Our work during Stage 3 also focused on how we might test whether – and how far – new or revised survey methods could address some of the challenges in research with separated families. We concluded that it was advisable to do some large-scale piloting work prior to embarking on a more ambitious longitudinal study design. We articulate the design of this pilot work in Section 6.

Stage 4: What should our next steps be?

The final stage of our study was to consult with stakeholders about the conclusions from our study. We convened a half-day workshop with potential funders and users of the data and/or of the evidence which the data would generate. There was general agreement with our proposed approach that the best next steps would be to seek funding for some large-scale piloting work whilst continuing discussions on how to bolster the existing studies to maximise the data that could be collected via these routes.

2 What are the evidence needs on family separation?

2.1 Overview

Our consultation work highlighted many (often unanswered) questions about the experiences and implications of family separation, both wide-ranging in their topic coverage and requiring in-depth information. The number of different perspectives from which these questions were asked is to be highlighted. Firstly, they straddle different government departments. Notably, the Department for Work and Pensions has evidence needs related to its responsibility for welfare provision for single parent households, couple and post-separation relationship support and the statutory child maintenance system. Likewise the Ministry of Justice has a focus on families entering the legal system (including mediation) in England and Wales in relation to post-separation negotiations around divorce, financial settlements and child arrangements. However, departments such as Education and Communities and Local Government also have responsibility for policies affecting or being affected by family separation. Secondly, research questions from policy and practitioner interest groups span a wide range of foci including child poverty, child welfare, single and non-resident parenthood, family law and family justice, and mental health (both adult and child) as well as relationship support. And, lastly, those working on research related to family separation approach it from a range of substantive research disciplines (including economics, law and socio-legal studies, sociology, demography, social policy, health and psychology).

Data on family separation are needed to augment the substantive knowledge base available for analysis by researchers and academics in the short- to longer-term. At the simplest level, we need to be able to describe and document how our society is changing over time in terms of family structures - and how families function within different family arrangements. But beyond this, we need to understand the ways in which family structures – specifically, in our context, separated families – affect parent and child trajectories and those individuals' outcomes in order to inform the development of policy and practice that will maximise children's and parents' immediate levels of well-being and future life chances. In particular, data are needed to enable policy-makers and those wanting to develop and offer services and support to separating and separated families to measure the impact and effectiveness of different interventions.

In broad terms, the evidence needs can be categorised into:

- An understanding of the factors that *lead* to separation, and how families' pre-separation lives influence their post-separation lives;
- The implications of separation on parent and child *outcomes* (sometimes relative to pre-separation or intact family outcomes);
- An understanding of the *trajectories* that families take post-separation, and the implications of these on parent and child outcomes (covering life chances, health and well-being, employment and finances, educational outcomes, and so on);
- An understanding of the way in which *policy* (changes) (at a national/devolved government level) affect:

    - Outcomes for separated families, irrespective of the time since the separation;
    - Outcomes for newly separated families;
- Families' decisions around separation and propensity to separate, and factors which may influence decisions to separate or not.[29]

Within these evidence needs, most research questions tend to relate to one or more of the following set of broad (inter-related) issues related to family separation:

- Relationship breakdown and the process of separating;
- Divorce and legal services relating to separation from marriage or cohabitation;
- Pre- and post-separation relationships and parenting;
- Children's living arrangements post-separation;
- Pre- and post-separation income and finances, and child maintenance post-separation;
- Pre- and post-separation use of services and support needs around relationships, parenting and arrangements post separation.

And within each of these substantive areas, the questions divide into those about:

- The demographic profile of the families involved;
- Their current situations;
- The pathways families took and their experiences;
- The outcomes for these families.

The information needs framework we developed during our consultations and review work on evidence needs and research questions is structured along these lines, cross-referencing the substantive issues with the type of question. In Sections 2.3 and 2.4, we use the same structure to draw out the breadth and range of evidence needs around family separation. Whilst – on the face of it – this structure appears to perpetuate the silo approach, within each issue we highlight the *links* between the substantive areas, emphasising how far a holistic approach to research is required to understand these families' lives and the implications of various policies affecting them. We return to this in later sections where we assess what data is, and would ideally be, available.

2.2 Parameters

The breadth of the study required us to construct at least some parameters around its scope. Our decisions on each of these have been informed by a basic principle that our *central* focus is on *children* involved in family separation (primarily whilst dependent but also into adulthood):

- We define a 'family' as being one with dependent children.[30] So, we include evidence needs that relate to parents as well as children, and their wider family (e.g. step-family members, grandparents). Whilst we recognise the importance of evidence on the impacts of

[29] Although this has not been raised explicitly during the consultations, it is an issue underlying current Westminster government policy around family stability and is therefore included in our considerations.

[30] Although this may mean tracking these children beyond the age at which they were dependent, to look at longer-term consequences of family separation on those who experience it in childhood.

separation for families without dependent children, both as their own focus and as potential precursors of families with dependent children, they are outside the remit of our study.

- When considering parents, we include not only legal, including adoptive, parents but also step-parents who are viewed as the child's parent, either themselves or by the child or child's other parent. We are concerned not only with the genetic links, but with those who play a significant part in a child's life, which could continue after parental separation.
- Our interest in the lives of intact families specifically relates to how they compare to the lives of separating and separated families in order to understand factors such as families' predictors and pathways into separation and to compare the outcomes for similar families who stay together or separate.[31]
- Our primary focus is on issues related directly to family separation (as reflected in our list in Section 2.1). Broader information on 'family life' (e.g. childcare, recreation and leisure) is important in terms of profiling separated families or as explanatory variables to explain issues related to family separation, rather than of interest in its own right.[32]
- Our focus is the lives of parents and children within separated and separating families, and their wider family. The broader implications of family separation (e.g. on the public purse, on public attitudes and societal norms) are outside of the remit of this study.

In Section 2.3, we attempt to summarise the evidence needs articulated within each substantive area listed in Section 2.1. We then go on, in Section 2.4, to describe the generic questions – or data types – that are required to answer these, broadly categorised into profile, circumstances/arrangements, pathways/processes and outcomes.

2.3 Evidence needs: substantive topics

2.3.1 Relationship breakdown and transition into separation

The immediate pathway into relationship breakdown, and what happens during and soon after separation, are critical in terms of the short and longer-term impacts on parents and children. There are a wide range of evidence needs around the detail of what happens over that period: how post-separation arrangements are negotiated; the effects on different family members; and – importantly from a policy and practice perspective – what support is required or sought. Some of the types of evidence are similar to those about the post-separation period (e.g. relationships, parenting, contact and residence arrangements for the child, financial support), but the context is different, and requires an in-depth understanding of the dynamics of the separation process.

Examples of the range of questions included in this area are:

[31] However, we recognise that any new data collection that we propose on intact families would only be viable if there was a wider call for data on these families.

[32] Likewise, when we assess the available datasets, we include only those which provide substantive information on issues related to separation. We do not include datasets where the only information is whether or not a family is separated. For example, whilst the DfE Childcare Survey provides the best repeat cross-sectional data on childcare and early years provision, and identifies resident parents, it is not included within our evidence base given it contains no further information related specifically to the experiences of family separation.

Understanding factors that lead to separation, and how families' pre-separation lives influence their post-separation lives

- What were the reasons for separation? Who instigated it?
- How far does the reason for separation affect how families are able to negotiate their post-separation relationships, child arrangements and financial support?

Implications of separation on parent and child outcomes

- What impact do the reasons for separation – and how the separation was handled – have on parents' and children's mental health in the short and longer-term? And on the relationships between children and both their parents?

Understanding trajectories that families take post-separation, and implications on parent and child outcomes

- How were living arrangements sorted immediately post-separation?
- What discussions were had about/what consideration was given to the children's situation, e.g. living arrangements and finances, and to what extent were children involved in any discussions?
- Where do parents turn for advice at this stage and how does that shape decisions?
- (How) were arrangements made for financial support and contact/residence arrangements for the child? How soon after separation were these discussed, if at all?

Understanding how policy (changes) affect outcomes

- What is the impact of changes to the statutory maintenance system in how newly separated families negotiate maintenance arrangements?
- How effective is relationship support provision in helping parents to co-parent during and soon after separating?

2.3.2 Pre- and post-separation relationships and parenting

There is a clear need for evidence on relationships and parenting approaches among separated families – for mapping, for following trajectories and for understanding outcomes. This includes a nuanced understanding of the associations – and pathways – between how families functioned prior to separation and how things work after separation. And, in turn, how relationships and approaches to co-parenting are sustained or shift as the length of time since separation increases and other factors (e.g. new families, the child's increasing age, changing economic circumstances) come into play. There are questions around the interaction (particularly the causal pathways) between pre- and post-separation relationships and parenting and separated families' arrangements for financial support, contact and residence; and about the advice and support that families do or do not seek, and the effectiveness of this support. Overarching all of this are two questions: what is the variation across families with different demographic profiles, and what are the outcomes of parents and children with different experiences?

Examples of the range of questions included in this area are:

Understanding factors that lead to separation, and how families' pre-separation lives influence their post-separation lives

- How far did the parents' division of labour and child-rearing roles within the pre-separation household reflect and affect the post-separation approach to co-parenting?
- What factors (pre- and post-separation) lead to good relationships post-separation between parents and between parents and their children?
- What are the power dynamics between parents post-separation, and how do these relate to their relationships prior to separation?

Implications of separation on parent and child outcomes

- What impact does family separation (and the resulting consequences in terms of physical, emotional, financial well-being) have on the standard of living of each parent, the numbers of children living in poverty and children's educational attainment (and concrete measures of disrupted relationships such as school changes / job changes, house moves)?
- How far does the quality of parents' post-separation relationships affect their ability to make effective arrangements for the children and for financial support? What impact do these have on parents' mental and physical health?

Understanding trajectories that families take post-separation, and implications on parent and child outcomes

- Post-separation, what role does each parent have in raising their child, and how were these roles negotiated and agreed (including both legal and social parents' roles)?
- What factors predict rapid adaptation?
- How (far/well) do separated parents discuss issues related to their child with each other?
- To what extent do parents discuss issues with their child?
- Who has shared residence arrangements? What do these look like?
- Post-separation, how much time does each parent spend with their child, and doing what?
- What is the quality of separated parents' communication, and what improves or hinders this?
- What determines the quality of relationship between children (at different life stages) and their legal and social parents?
- How is conflict resolved within separated families?
- What triggers changes in post-separation relationships, and how are these handled?
- What is the quality of relationships between children, step-parents and step-siblings? What helps and hinders this?
- What do children want in terms of their relationships with parents and how they are co-parented?
- Which approaches to co-parenting work best for which types of families/children?

Understanding how policy (changes) affect outcomes

- How (far) can post-separation parenting support improve parents' capacity to co-parent effectively?
- What impact has government relationship support provision had on family separation?

2.3.3 Post-separation arrangements for children

A key aspect of post-separation relationships and parenting is the arrangements about where a child lives and how their time is divided between parents and other family members. Much of the current evidence on this focuses on objective measures of the amount of time that

children spend with each parent. However, the evidence needs are much wider than this, concerned as much with 'quality' of contact as quantity. Recent changes in legislation in England and Wales (see Section 1.4) have placed a spotlight on this issue, creating a need for evidence to provide a more nuanced picture not only of the arrangements that families have, but also of how these are negotiated, how sustainable they are as family circumstances change and children grow up, and how differences in the quality and quantity of the contact affects children's outcomes and their relationships with their parents into the longer-term. Newer technologies mean that a wider range of contact 'types' need to be captured by research. Examples of questions included in this area are:

Understanding factors that lead to separation, and how families' pre-separation lives influence their post-separation lives

- Whether and how parenting roles prior to separation influence the quality and quantity of contact after separation, and if this continues to be influential as the length of time since separation increases?

Implications of separation on parent and child outcomes

- To what extent does time spent with the non-resident parent mitigate any negative consequences of family separation on children's outcomes? How important is quantity compared to quality of time and relationships?

Understanding trajectories that families take post-separation, and implications for parent and child outcomes

- How are the arrangements for the child (contact and residence) made?
- Are the arrangements formal or informal? What factors are taken into consideration?
- How happy are parents and children with the arrangements?
- What leads to any changes in the arrangements? Who instigates this? How are they agreed?
- What are the reasons for parents not complying with agreed arrangements?
- How far are children consulted and their wishes taken into account?
- What arrangements work best for children of different ages?
- What role do the legal system (including solicitors), statutory agencies and third sector have in helping parents make and maintain arrangements?

Understanding how policy (changes) affect outcomes

- How do parents in high conflict situations negotiate and maintain arrangements since changes to the legal aid system in England and Wales?
- What effects have the various policy changes had on the quality of contact that children have with their non-resident parents?
- What effects have the changes in the 2014 Act had on the arrangements parents make for their children in England and Wales? How have these affected children's outcomes?
- Are there any knock-on consequences of other policies in terms of the types of relationships parents can have with their ex partners and children (e.g. spare room subsidy, austerity)?

2.3.4 Pre- and post-separation income and finances, and child maintenance

The post-separation financial circumstances of both resident parent and non-resident parent households are central to understanding the experiences and effects of family separation across a range of disciplines and policy areas, often requiring data from families over an extended period of time. The effect of separation on families' incomes and living standards has wide-reaching implications for the economy, including potentially greater reliance on the state welfare and housing systems, shifts in parents' ability to take on and need for paid employment, and an impact on levels of child poverty, with two households rather than one being supported by (often) the same total income. However, families' incomes – and what they can afford to do with those incomes – have wider family implications, on children's childhood experiences, on the health and well-being of both parents and children, and the choices that these families have. And in turn, these families' incomes are affected by changing family circumstances, such as re-partnering of one or other parent, of children getting older and needing different (higher or lower) financial resources. Recent policy changes around child maintenance mean that there is a call for up-to-date and detailed information on this issue. But the financial support by non-resident parents of their children (in the form of regular child maintenance or more informal support) is not only of interest in terms of its impact on the incomes and living standards of resident parents and non-resident parents. It is also bound up in discussions about the moral and legal obligations of parents to support their children (financially and otherwise), and about the role of the legal system and/or state in deciding on what that support should be and in enforcing its payment.

Examples of questions included in this area are:

Understanding factors that lead to separation, and how families' pre-separation lives influence their post-separation lives

- How far do financial pressures contribute to family separation? What are the causal pathways?
- How far do families' financial situations prior to separation affect decisions about the division of financial assets and provision of financial support from non-resident parents post-separation? What are the causal pathways?
- What proportion of resident parents on benefit were benefit recipients prior to separation (i.e. how far is benefit dependency a function of the separation)?
- What are the effects of making financial contributions on the income and employment options of non-resident parents?

Implications of separation on parent and child outcomes

- What proportion of families enter poverty as a result of separation?
- How long do any negative consequences on families' incomes last after separation? Where they recover, how does this happen (employment, benefits/tax credits, maintenance, repartnering, etc.)?

Understanding trajectories that families take post-separation, and implications on parent and child outcomes

- After separation, what decisions do parents make about their patterns and hours of employment, and why? How much of a role do financial considerations play?
- What are the barriers and facilitators to parents working post-separation?
- What maintenance arrangements do families make? How do they arrange them, how well are they sustained (and why), how compliant are they (and why)?
- How much financial support do non-resident parents provide? How is this amount decided?
- What other ad hoc payments or informal transactions are made? How does this interact with maintenance?
- What is maintenance spent on, and who decides this?
- What arrangements do families have where there has been domestic abuse prior to separation?
- Which parents do not have maintenance arrangements in place? What leads to this?
- How should maintenance levels be calculated? What considerations are/should be taken into account when arranging type, frequency and amount?
- What role do children and wider family members have sustaining maintenance arrangements?
- How are maintenance arrangements/payments affected by changes in family formation, e.g. new partner, employment status changes, other children?
- What effect do maintenance payments have on parents' income and poverty levels?
- Are maintenance payments linked to contact and other family arrangements?

Understanding how policy (changes) affect outcomes

- How, if at all, have the types of child maintenance arrangements that families have in place changed over time, as policies in child maintenance have evolved?
- How far are families' decisions on financial support affected by charges to use the statutory system and (in England and Wales) removal of legal aid in relation to family proceedings?
- Who uses statutory or third sector support to help negotiate maintenance arrangements, and how well does this work?

2.3.5 Use of legal services for separation from marriage or cohabitation

Family separation can lead to involvement of legal services, whether to agree a divorce or to set up family arrangements in relation to finances/property or children, or to resolve disputes in relation to these matters. Recent changes in England and Wales to legislation and financial support available for obtaining help from solicitors or going to court (see Section 1.4) mean that up-to-date data are needed to address several research questions, some to provide a current (post-policy change) picture of these issues and others to focus specifically on the impact of these changes. Examples of questions included in this area are:

Understanding factors that lead to separation, and how families' pre-separation lives influence their post-separation lives

- What pre-separation factors influence the legal routes that families take during separation and post-separation?

Understanding trajectories that families take post-separation, and implications on parent and child outcomes

- What reasons are given for divorce under what circumstances? Under what circumstances do parents choose to file for divorce using fault-based or no-fault facts to prove irretrievable breakdown of marriage?
- What are the implications of citing fault on parents' propensity to negotiate effective maintenance and contact/residence arrangements?
- How long does the divorce process take under different circumstances, how much does it cost, and how affordable is this?
- How does the divorce process/experience affect parents' wellbeing and their post-separation relationships between themselves and with their children?
- What financial settlements are made during divorce/separation from cohabitation?
- Who goes for legal advice/to court to settle financial or child arrangements? How far does this affect the decisions parents make and their financial situations, post-divorce? Are there differences in the arrangements made by parents who have accessed legal advice/court and those who have not?
- How do parents fund legal advice, assistance and/or representation? What impact does this have on their finances?
- How do formerly cohabiting parents resolve property/financial matters?
- Are financial/property settlements, especially around housing, linked to children's living arrangements?
- How formalised are the arrangements for children? How often are child arrangements set out in the form of court orders and parenting plans?
- When and how often is contact with parents and other family members considered?

Understanding how policy (changes) affect experiences in court

- What sort of people tend to have legal representation at court, and what sort of people proceed as a litigant in person? What are the experiences and outcomes of those litigating in person and those who were deterred (for financial or other reasons) from seeking legal advice/going to court?

2.3.6 Use of services and support needs

For all of the above issues, parents may have sought – or potentially would have benefited from – support, advice and information from legal, statutory or third party organisations, and there are a wide range of research questions around the reach and the effectiveness of these. These issues are particularly pertinent given a government shift towards encouraging separating and separated families to make their own arrangements – with advice and support – for finances and child arrangements rather than use statutory services or the courts. Looking across legal support (including Cafcass and equivalent bodies in Scotland/Northern Ireland) and third sector and statutory advice, information and mediation for parents, examples of questions in this area are:

Understanding factors that lead to separation, and how families' pre-separation lives influence their post-separation lives

- When and from whom do families seek advice and support prior to separation? How effective is support for families prior to separation in making effective arrangements post-separation?

Understanding trajectories that families take post-separation, and implications on parent and child outcomes

- Which parents access which types of support, when and why?
- What types of support do parents want, use and which are most effective?
- What support best meets the needs of non-resident parents? Do their advice and support needs vary from resident parents'?
- How would parents prefer to access support? What are their barriers to take-up?
- How can parents best be informed about what support services are available?
- How well does mediation work, for whom and when?
- What affects parents' ability to access appropriate support?
- Do government support services complement, contrast with or duplicate those provided by the third sector?
- Do children from separated families have distinct support needs to deal with issues around separation? How do these vary with age or over time?
- How involved are grandparents and the wider family network in supporting parents and children through and after separation? What is the nature and impact of their input?

Understanding how policy (changes) affect outcomes

- How well does the third sector provide the support required for separating and separated families in the context of changes in the state provision and legal systems?

2.4 Evidence needs: types of data

Looking across the range of research questions above, they require data that can be categorized broadly into four types:

- Socio-demographic profile
- Current situations
- Pathways and processes over time
- Outcomes

In sub-sections 2.4.1 to 2.4.4, we reflect on each of these, articulating the data required, and the need or otherwise for quantitative versus qualitative data, and longitudinal versus cross-sectional data.

2.4.1 Social, demographic and economic profile data

Understanding the profile of families experiencing separation – and all the various aspects of separation described above – requires a breadth of (largely) quantitative data on the socio-demographics of these families. Some questions require cross-sectional data on separated

families at a single point in time (and could use repeat cross-sections to look at trends of over time). Others require longitudinal data, tracking the same families over time – sometimes post-separation, and in other instances both prior to and after separation.

There is also a wide range of research needs which simply relate to the demographic profile of families (sometimes prior to and post-separation), a few examples of which include:

- What is the socio-demographic profile of separated families, and how does that compare to the profile of intact families?
- Which, if any, socio-demographic factors are associated with families separating?
- How quickly do resident parents and non-resident parents re-partner and what do these new households look like?
- How many transitions do families go through (separation, re-partnering, separation)?
- What proportion of children are born into single parent households, and what is their profile?
- How do the incomes of separated families relate to their income prior to separation?
- What are separated families' incomes and what do they spend their money on?
- What are the working patterns of resident parents and non-resident parents? What childcare do they use and need?
- What links do separated families have with family, friends and social networks?
- What socio-demographic factors are associated with more effective contact and maintenance arrangements?

2.4.2 Current situations

A second form of 'profiling' data is data that describe the *circumstances* of separating and separated families at a certain point in time. These include the arrangements for the children, non-resident parents' provision of financial support to the child's household, how parents are co-parenting, relationships between parents and children, and so on. Research questions focus on 'arrangements' that families have in place (formally, informally or implicitly) and what happens in reality. They include both subjective measures of 'what happens' and the views of parents and children about their circumstances at a given point in time. Again, the data required here are usually quantitative and cross-sectional, providing data on prevalence at a single point in time. Some of the more nuanced questions might benefit from additional qualitative data. Again, change over time could be measured with repeat cross-sectional data as well as longitudinal data.

So, taking non-resident parents' contact with their children as an example, the types of data that capture circumstances and arrangements include:

- How much time non-resident parents spend with their children
- How that time is spent
- The pattern of contact
- Frequency of overnight stays by the children with their non-resident parent, and where they stay
- How well non-resident parents and children get on

- Happiness of resident parents/non-resident parents/children about the quality and quantity of contact
- Whether the contact pattern is a set formal/informal arrangement
- Flexibility of arrangements
- Reliability of each parent in keeping to the arrangement
- Prevalence of equal shared care

2.4.3 Pathways and processes

Measuring family separation in single or repeat cross-sectional 'snapshots' does not allow us to understand the *pathways* that families tread into separation and post-separation. A substantial part of the evidence required concerns *how* and *why* families separate and then subsequently take particular routes after separation, and the factors that influence these pathways. These questions require longitudinal data that track the same families over time. While this can be done quantitatively within surveys, longitudinal qualitative data would enhance the quality of evidence available.

Again taking the example of non-resident parents' contact with their children, data are required on issues such as:

- The process of coming to an initial arrangement about contact
    - Whether formal/informal and involvement of third parties (e.g. mediation, lawyer, court, conciliation)
    - Whether led by resident parent or non-resident parent
    - Involvement of child
- What factors are taken into consideration when making arrangement
- Whether collaborative or conflictual discussion
- Views on process/arrangement made
- Reasons for having no set arrangement, and views on this
- Reasons for having no contact, and views on this
- Compliance with arrangement, over time
- Reasons for non-compliance
- Whether arrangement been revisited over time, and why
- The factors affecting how well contact arrangements work and why they stop working

2.4.4 Outcomes

A key driver for requiring data on family separation is the need to understand the short-, medium- and long-term effects of separation on parents, children and the wider family (step-relatives, grandparents, and so on). Many of the research questions above relate to the impact of separation on outcomes for the families involved, and the various pathways and experiences of families post-separation. The outcomes fall into two categories: those relating to the circumstances in which families find themselves post-separation; and those relating to parents' and children's well-being and life chances. Measuring the impacts on families' outcomes requires longitudinal data on the same families, often over quite an extended period.

Post-separation outcomes include:
- Financial support arrangements (maintenance, financial settlements)
- Arrangements for children
- Relationships (between parent and child, between parents, among wider family)
- Income levels and financial stability
- Housing circumstances
- Employment

Parents' and children's well-being and life chance outcomes include:
- Parents' mental and physical health and well-being
- Children's socio-emotional development
- Children's mental and physical health and well-being
- Children's capacity for resilience
- Children's relationships with other children/into adulthood
- Children's educational attainment and aspirations

2.4.5 Evidence jigsaw

What is very clear from our description of the evidence needs above and the types of data they necessarily draw on is that in order to answer many questions we need to *combine* different types of data in order to answer the questions. So, for instance, as a simple example, we need demographic data and data on current circumstances to answer questions about which families have which types of arrangements or patterns of contact. And we need data on families' pathways and their outcomes to understand how different post-separation experiences are associated with better or worse outcomes. As a result, when assessing the available evidence in Section 4, we have focused on the available data that could be used *in combination* to address the research questions.

However, before doing so, in Section 3 we draw back and consider the implications of the evidence needs described in Section 2 for what data are required within a robust data infrastructure on family separation.

3 What types of evidence do we need? What are the methodological considerations?

3.1 Overview

Section 2 highlights the depth and breadth of evidence required across the policy, research and practitioner communities in order to understand the lives of separating and separated families with children. For some, the need is for a holistic understanding of families' lives; for others, the focus is on particular sub-groups, defined by families' demography, their trajectories, support routes they have taken, and so on.

Before reviewing the current data infrastructure on family separation in Section 4, in this section, we reflect on some of the *types* of data and/or evidence that we need. The key issues raised are:

- The need for longitudinal data versus repeat or one-off cross-sectional data (section 3.2);
- The role of data from intact families as well as separated families (section 3.3);
- Identifying causal effects (section 3.4);
- Measuring the impact of services, interventions, policies and policy changes (section 3.5);
- The need for data providing a holistic picture across families' lives versus information focused on particular aspects or times of their lives (section 3.6);
- The need for data from non-resident parents (section 3.7);
- The role of data from children (section 3.8);
- The use of administrative data (section 3.9);
- The role of qualitative data (section 3.10).

Where relevant, we identify the key methodological considerations when reviewing the quality of the current evidence or considering collecting new data. These have informed our thinking when assessing the data that are currently available (Sections 4 and 5) and how we might best design any new data collection (Section 6). We also review briefly what lessons we might learn from international studies on family separation (section 3.11).

3.2 Longitudinal versus cross-sectional data

In evaluating how to address the evidence needs around the lives of separated families, a key factor we have considered is how far longitudinal data – tracking the same families over time – is required, and how far the evidence needs can be addressed by looking at a cross-section – or repeat cross-sections – of different families. **Overall, our conclusion is that many of the key questions related to the lives of separated families need to be addressed using *longitudinal* data.** For some questions, data are required on the families' lives pre-separation (see Section 3.3). For other questions, longitudinal data post-separation is sufficient. Cross-sectional data will meet *some* evidence needs.

3.2.1 The type of longitudinal study needed

Evidence requiring longitudinal data often relates to the trajectories of families over time and their resultant outcomes. Some examples of the broad types of questions about *post*-separation life include:

- What arrangements are made and how do they change over time? What influences these changes?
- How are parents'/children's outcomes affected by their experiences of family separation? What factors are related to better or worse outcomes for parents/children?
- How long are any negative consequences of family separation felt by parents and children? What factors affect this?
- What variation is there in the experiences and outcomes of families who seek or do not seek professional (legal, statutory or third sector) support, either for their pre-separation relationships or to negotiate their post-separation arrangements?

These types of questions are most easily addressed using longitudinal data from samples representing the whole range of separated families (i.e. with different personal characteristics, different family arrangements, including families who separated at different points in time/of the policy cycle, with children of different ages, and so on). This suggests a longitudinal study of families, similar to the UKHLS. The alternative longitudinal design (perhaps more common in UK research) is a single year birth cohort, which tracks children (and their families) born within a particular time window. Although valuable,[33] there are two key reasons why analysis of family separation within birth cohorts can be more difficult: first, there is a long wait to get data on families with older children; and secondly, when looking at the impacts of parental separation when children are young versus older, it is impossible to separate out the timing of the separation from other changes over that time (e.g. changes in policy background, in education, in employment). An alternative, hybrid design would be a cohort study which started with children at different age points (e.g. pregnancy; age 3; age 8): this would bring the advantages of the cohort studies (e.g. their ability to collect age-specific outcomes data) while providing data more quickly on a wider spectrum of families.

It is possible to look across *different* birth cohorts: this would theoretically allow for the effect of separation at the same age but across different time periods to be studied, or for the effect of separation at different ages within the same time period. But this would require some level of harmonisation of questions across the cohorts. Moreover, birth cohort studies are launched very infrequently (most recently, 1970 (Birth Cohort Study 70), 1992 (Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children), 2001 (Millennium Cohort Study), with the result that the latest UK birth cohort are already well into their teens. The cancellation of Life Study means that there will be a *very* considerable gap between the MCS cohort and any future birth cohort. All this reduces our ability to rely on the existing birth cohort studies for the study of family separation in the short- to medium-term, at least. The Longitudinal Study of Young People in England cohorts (LSYPE), or 'Next Steps', including the age-25 survey, help to fill in some gaps, though with much less intensive data collection.

[33] Particularly given the wealth of child outcome data typically available from the birth cohorts.

3.2.2 The uses of cross-sectional data

Where information is required about a single 'snapshot' in time, data from a cross-sectional sample of families will suffice. And *repeat* cross-sections – collecting data from different families each time – provide aggregate trends over time among the separated family population. Repeat cross-sectional studies can therefore address information needed about the profile of families, measures of current prevalence and reports of recent experiences, including – by way of example – the following broad types of questions:

- What is the socio-demographic profile of families who separate?
- What contact/residence arrangements are made for children? Has this changed over time?
- What proportion of resident parents receive child maintenance from the non-resident parent? How much do they receive, how compliant are they with the arrangement? What type of arrangement is it, and have they tried any others?
- How have these arrangements changed since the changes to the statutory maintenance system and removal of legal aid?
- What types of support did parents seek when setting up their post-separation arrangements, and how helpful was that support?

Of course, many of the 'data' required to answer these questions overlap with the data required to address the longitudinal questions described above. So, given the established need for longitudinal data, this still suggests that the most cost-effective approach to any new data collection is to collect data longitudinally, and to use individual waves from the longitudinal dataset to answer the cross-sectional questions. However, the disadvantage of this approach is that attrition in the longitudinal panel might make the cross-sectional prevalence estimates somewhat less reliable than those obtained from a fresh cross-sectional survey. This is especially so where, as in the case of estimates about contact and maintenance, there is a correlation between the issue being measured and the profile of those dropping out of the study.

3.3 The need for pre-separation data

The primary focus of our work is on the data required to understand the lives of separating and separated families. A key question is how far we need to understand the lives of families *prior* to separation in order to understand them post-separation. Within this, there are a number of sub-questions to consider:

- Do we need pre-separation data from the separated families, or is it sufficient to look cross-sectionally at intact families and at separated families?
- Do we need to collect data contemporaneously, or can we use retrospective data on the pre-separation period once families have separated?
- How far back do we need to collect data? For instance, do we need data prior to the children being born, prior to couples starting relationships, etc.?

Certainly, in broad terms, the answer is that – for many (but not all) issues – the evidence is strengthened by understanding separated families' circumstances prior to separation. The types of broad questions that rely on pre-separation data include:

- Which families separate and why?
- What support could be put in place to support families to stay together or to minimise the negative consequences of separation?
- Which relationship arrangements are linked to the best relationships and arrangements after separation? How far can this be predicted by their lives prior to separation?
- What are the consequences of staying together versus separating when relationships are poor?

Questions that focus more specifically on the trajectories of families *after* separation arguably require less on the families' circumstances prior to separation. So, for questions around the effectiveness of different post-separation interventions, information on the pre-separation characteristics of those families might be deemed as 'desirable' rather than 'essential'.

The strongest evidence to address these questions about the period prior to separation will come from studying families longitudinally with tracking of families during the period prior to separation.

Research which has sought to answer the types of questions posed above indicates that (sole) reliance on retrospective data would be problematic because of the limitations on the types of data that it is suitable to collect retrospectively. While certain pre-separation predictors of post-separation behaviours can be collected quite reliably by retrospective questions (e.g. parents' experience of own parents' divorce, educational qualifications, income), others – such as pre-separation relationship quality and parenting – cannot, as it is likely affected by their subsequent experiences.[34]

3.4 Identifying causal effects

Measuring the effects of family separation is problematic because of the simple fact that those families who separate are different from those who do not. As shown in Section 2, many of the questions we want to answer are about the effects – or impacts – of family separation (e.g. what is the differential impact of family separation on children's outcomes depending on their age at separation), or of the different experiences that families go through on the route to and through separation (e.g. how effective are family-based maintenance arrangements versus statutory arrangements?). The difficulty is that families who separate are not the same as families who do not separate – they are not two random groups of families whom we can track to see whether separation or staying together leads to better outcomes. They are self-selected groups, whose particular life circumstances, personalities and so on lead them to stay together or separate. Indeed, these life circumstances and experiences may be more important in understanding the effects on children than separation itself. Likewise, the post-separation arrangements that families make are related to their personalities and pre- and post-separation circumstances. For instance, those who make family-based maintenance arrangements tend to be those who feel in a better position to negotiate their own arrangements, compared to those who turn to the state to facilitate this. We cannot simply

[34] Brewer and Nandi are currently exploring the effect on estimates of using retrospective versus prospective data on relationship history using data from the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) and the UKHLS.

compare the two groups, for example, and see whether statutory or family-based arrangements are better in ensuring that non-resident parents pay the maintenance that is due. To study the effects of separation, longitudinal data are needed on both separating and intact families.

If enough data can be collected about families, particularly prior to the separation, it will, in principle, be possible to iron out many of the self-selection effects in data analysis. That is, we can control for confounding variables, *as long as those variables have been captured*. Through analysis, we can try to compare families who look – on the face of it – similar pre-separation and compare the outcomes of those who stay together versus split. However, the only reliable way to ensure that all the differences are captured is (a) for there to be a strong evidence base about what factors, other than separation, affect outcomes for parents and children, and (b) for data on those other factors to be reliably captured. If those factors are measured with error, then the relationship between separation and outcome may be biased.

3.5 Measuring the effect of services, interventions, policies and policy changes

A sub-set of the evidence needs relate to the effect of policies or policy changes (e.g. concerning statutory child maintenance, legal aid, mediation, welfare benefits). Where these involve a national rollout at a single point in time, finding a contemporary counterfactual is often not feasible. In these circumstances, historical and contemporary data from longitudinal or repeat cross-sectional studies are often useful in measuring the impact of these changes, provided that it is possible to control for other changes (e.g. policies, demographics) over that period. This is especially the case where those affected by the policy changes are not identifiable within administrative data sources (as is the case with separated families affected by changes to legal and statutory support who simply go 'off radar' (see Sections 3.9 and 4.2). Cross-sectional data provide aggregate information regarding changes in the population – or sub-groups of the population – while longitudinal data can track how individuals react to these policy changes.

Arguably, to establish the impact of policy changes on family separation by comparing outcomes for the population of separated families before and after the change, data on intact families are not needed. Rather what is needed are samples of currently separated families prior to any change, plus similar samples after the change. Longitudinal data may still be needed so that outcomes for these families can be tracked for a period, but the starting sample in both the 'before' and 'after' policy periods can usually be post-separation families. (The exception would be a scenario where the policy change fundamentally alters the probability of separation for families, so that families who split in the 'before' period are very different from those in the 'after' period. Under that scenario, data on the family prior to the separation may be needed so that those pre-separation factors can be controlled for. It is plausible, however, that sufficient data for this could be collected from families retrospectively.)

Given all this, a study designed to monitor the impact of policy changes on the populations of separated families is likely to be one that recruits currently separated families and then tracks them over time, the sample being periodically refreshed with newly separated families. The

number of families recruited to the study would need to be large unless the policy changes being studied had very large effects.[35]

3.6 The range of data to collect per family: holistic versus issue-specific data collection

Families experience separation as a holistic process, often concurrently navigating through arrangements about contact/residence, divorce, financial support, housing and so on at the same time as dealing with changing relationships and family structures. Both policy and research has traditionally been conducted in silos, its parameters set by the remits of particular government departments or policies, the interests of policy groups, or the disciplines in which researchers work. But there is increasing appetite for data providing a more holistic picture. Within government, the previous Social Justice strategy considered family life in general, and family separation in particular, across departments and across policies. And while different elements of 'family separation' were previously the domain of various government departments, most policies now sit within one of two departments: the DWP and (where the courts are involved), in England and Wales, the MoJ. The existence of large-scale datasets providing data across a range of issues around family separation (e.g. the UKHLS and the MCS) means that researchers are increasingly able to consider family separation 'as a whole'.

Even when researchers, policy makers and practitioners are interested in *particular* issues around separation, they ideally need to understand the wider implications on other aspects of families' lives. There is greater potential to do this when quarrying existing large-scale datasets.

At other times – where the population of interest is very specific or accounts for a small proportion of the separated parent population (e.g. litigating families, users of particular services, young parents) – the evidence may need to come from bespoke data collection among that particular population and/or about the particular issues of interest. In these cases, it may be less feasible to collect data on the wider set of variables to achieve a more holistic view.

3.7 The need for data from non-resident parents

It is clear from the evidence needs presented in Section 2 that there is a strong call for data collected *directly* from non-resident parents. Although data collected from resident parents and (less commonly) children can provide a picture of the level and type of contact and relationships they have with the non-resident parent, the financial contribution he makes, his involvement in parenting, and so forth, this is only a partial picture, often from only one perspective. Even on seemingly objective measures such as levels of contact and the provision of financial support, studies of separated parents indicate that – even attempting to take into account non-response bias among non-resident parents – mothers tend to under-report and fathers to over-report the fathers' involvement (Peacey and Hunt, 2009). Moreover, without

[35] Typically a study that aims to monitor changes at a population level would need at least 1,500 in the before and after periods.

interviewing non-resident parents, we have very limited evidence – from non-resident parents' perspectives – on how and why different contact patterns arise, how maintenance arrangements are decided and negotiated, and how co-parenting arrangements emerge. These all influence children's experiences of their parents' separation and can impact on their short-term and longer-term outcomes.

Not enough is understood about the impact of family separation on non-resident parents, and on any subsequent new families they have. We identified a range of research questions in Section 2 along these lines, including the impact of family separation on non-resident parents' health and well-being; on their parenting ability; on their income levels and housing (which, of course, can all have secondary impacts on their children). Moreover, there are a number of questions for policy makers and practitioners about the types of help and support that non-resident parents need to negotiate post-separation arrangements and to parent effectively post-separation.

Again, this is about seeing the whole picture: we cannot fully understand some aspects of parents' lives without being able to put them in context. Particularly in terms of policy changes, it is difficult to propose measures on separated families without understanding the position of *both* parents, their respective motivations and constraints. Moreover, the arguments about involving non-resident parents in research are increasingly expressed in relation to the importance of encouraging fathers' participation more generally (e.g. in the use of service provision), treating fathers as 'parents' rather than 'second parents'.

Despite these evidence needs, there is a lack of (reliable and especially quantitative) data collected directly from non-resident parents; see further in Section 4. This is sometimes due to the primary foci of particular studies (e.g. most large-scale studies of family life or of children, such as the birth cohorts, focus on collecting data from mothers and children, sometimes including a shorter interview with resident partners/fathers). At other times, the lack of data from non-resident parents is due to the methodological challenges of obtaining a robust and representative sample of fathers.

Given that there is no way of identifying a representative sample of non-resident parents within existing databases (only those involved with the statutory or court system), studies often rely on non-resident parents identifying themselves in response to a set of survey questions about non-resident children. Those who self-identify are biased towards those who are in contact with their children, have better post-separation relationships and are more likely to support their children financially (Wikeley et al, 2008; Peacey and Hunt, 2008; UKHLS McKay own analysis). Most UK studies (with the exception of the UKHLS which has a limited sample of families in which both separated parents are interviewed) involve *separate* (i.e. unrelated) samples of resident parents and non-resident parents, rather than providing data on both halves of a separated family. There is a stronger body of qualitative evidence among non-resident parents (albeit on quite specific subgroups or topics, e.g. Andrews et al, 2011).

Nevertheless, while there are methodological challenges that might make it unfeasible to collect robust and representative data on non-resident parents, this would *not* negate the importance of collecting robust data from resident parents and children.

3.8 The need for data from children

Asking children and young people about their experiences of family separation – and collecting outcomes directly from them – provides an important perspective on family separation. There are three broad types of data that can be collected much more accurately from children than by relying on parental report: their relationships with their parents; the time they spend together; and their views on living in separated families (including step-relations, dealing with relationships between their two parents, financial constraints, etc.).

There are a number of methodological and ethical considerations to involving children and young people in studies of family separation. Many of these are standard to any research with children, and are well-practised elsewhere. Particular care would need to be given to ensuring that children and young people felt comfortable being interviewed about potentially sensitive issues, particularly in the immediate period after separation. A small number of previous studies have successfully attempted to do this (e.g. Dunn and Deater-Deckard, 2001; Hogan et al, 2002). Fortin et al (2012) asked young adults to reflect back on their experiences of parental separation during their childhood.

3.9 The role of administrative data

Administrative data in this context mean data routinely collected by government or other statutory bodies about members of the public that enable those bodies to carry out their business. There is increasing interest in use of this data for family research. The reasons for that increase in interest are complex, but include:

- Increased collaboration between government and research bodies such as the ESRC and the Administrative Data Linkage Service (ADLS), with the ambition of making (linked, anonymised) administrative data more readily available to researchers;
- A research programme within government looking at how administrative data might be used to supplement, or even replace, the census;
- Increased expertise within the research community in the management and analysis of such data;
- A concern about the costs and reliability of survey data, especially given falling response rates.

Administrative data have a number of advantages over survey data, but also a number of serious disadvantages. The main advantages are that the sample sizes are extremely large (usually a census of the relevant population), there should be no non-response biases and, because the data are captured for administrative reasons, the costs of using the data for research purposes are relatively low (*very* low compared to interviewer-administered survey costs). However, using administrative data as the *sole* data source for research on separation appears to be extremely problematic in the UK at present for a number of reasons:

- Most administrative datasets are based around individuals rather than households or families;

- Most administrative datasets of individuals do not record whether the people on that dataset are separated and/or lone parents;
- Most importantly, there do not seem to be any statutory obligations for separating parents to notify any government bodies of a separation. HMRC rules around Child Benefit imply that a separation (or re-partnering) must be notified to them, but email correspondence with the HMRC confirmed that it is not routinely enforced. The only administrative data system where a separation would routinely be recorded is benefit or tax credit receipt, but not all separating parents are in receipt of benefits or tax credits; the same is likely to apply locally to Council Tax liabilities;
- Finally, and comparatively minor relative to the other problems, there are often issues around data quality with administrative data. The data are collected for practical purposes and validation/QA checks may not be included on all fields.

Because of these problems, administrative data looks most promising in the short to medium term as data linked to survey data, as it is currently used in the major longitudinal studies. That is, households or individuals are primarily tracked by survey, but consent to link to administrative data is collected from survey participants, and the administrative data then provide more detailed or longer-term data regarding outcomes around employment, benefit receipt, NHS usage, educational outcomes, and criminal behaviour. Beyond this, DWP and HMRC administrative data could also potentially be used as a sampling frame for separated parents on benefit or tax credits if there were a research question for this group. And MoJ / court service data on court cases could be used as a data source, or sampling frame, for addressing research questions for separating or separated parents who go to court.[36] However, gaining access to these datasets for sampling purposes can be extremely difficult, especially for studies not funded by government.

In the longer term, other opportunities for using administrative data might arise. It has been put to us that it would be feasible *in principle* to create a longitudinal panel of families or households by linking together a number of administrative datasets. For instance, a birth cohort might be constructed starting with birth registration records, and then adding in National Pupil Database records for the child, DWP/HMRC records for the parents, NHS records for both parents and children, marriage and divorce records, and subsequent child births. Or, alternatively, a longitudinal dataset of households might be constructed by matching in administrative data around the individuals in the ONS census longitudinal study. However, although possibly feasible, we would not anticipate the *primary* focus behind such an ambitious study to be driven by a need to understand family separation better. Rather the motivation would be to draw a much broader picture of family and household dynamics in the UK. Furthermore, even though such a study would be a vastly important resource for understanding the impact of separation, we would nevertheless expect that identifying separation within an administrative panel of households would be particularly error prone. Without speaking to individuals directly about their circumstances, it would be difficult to distinguish separations from other family changes, such as temporary moves of one or more adults to other addresses. It is also worth noting that an administrative data longitudinal study would not help address many of the research questions we have identified around the causes

[36] The use of court files as a data source is discussed in Section 4.2.2.

of separation, relationships and parenting, or contact and residence: these require subjective and objective data collected directly from the families themselves.

As noted above, there are particular events/processes in the lives of some separating families that are well served by administrative data, e.g. any engagement with the court system or Cafcass (in England and Wales) around divorce or child arrangements, and any engagement with the Child Maintenance Service. These, of course, only give data on particular subsets of separating families. Plus the data they provide are restricted to the information that is necessary to progress the case, so is inevitably very limited in background data about the family. But for studies particularly focused on these subsets of families, analysis of the administrative data or case records may be sufficient. Where the data were not sufficient, the administrative records could *possibly* be used as a sampling frame for a survey or qualitative research, if the necessary consents were in place. But access to non-anonymised administrative records for research is rarely easy to obtain unless the research is funded by government.

3.10 The role of qualitative data

A number of the research questions articulated in Section 2 would benefit from the integration/synthesis of quantitative and qualitative data. Qualitative data allow us to understand in more nuanced detail how families negotiate and manage their arrangements, why they come to the arrangements they do, how they feel about them, and so on. They can help to disentangle the ways in which multiple and cumulative experiences impact upon parents and children. Indeed, an existing strong body of qualitative research has done just that, among resident parents, non-resident parents and children (see for example Dermott, 2014; Bryson et al, 2013; Harkness and Skipp, 2013; Fortin et al, 2012; Peacey and Hunt, 2008; Bell et al, 2005).

In our scoping study, we focused on the role of qualitative data as part of a wider, comprehensive data infrastructure on family separation. In particular, we have visualised how they might help to add 'flesh' to some of the issues we might propose collecting in a longitudinal survey. An attractive model would be to embed a number of qualitative studies within a larger longitudinal panel study, with certain life events 'triggering' a more in-depth qualitative interview. In some instances, the qualitative data would be used to augment the quantitative survey data (e.g. the introduction of a step-family). Alternatively, where a sub-group or circumstance is relatively uncommon within the wider population of separated families (e.g. young parents; going to court), these kinds of qualitative studies would provide data on issues/groups otherwise left invisible within the wider panel of separated families.

As with the quantitative data, there are strong arguments for *longitudinal* qualitative data collection. We can point to some strong examples where the longitudinal element has been invaluable for the data it provides (e.g. Ridge and Miller, 2013, with lone mothers; Miller, 2010 with non-resident parents; England and Edin, 2007 with separated parents).

3.11 Methodological learning from international studies

In the sections above, we highlight a number of methodological considerations that arise when researching the experiences and outcomes of separating and separated families. For many of these, there is little in the way of evidence or practical experience within the UK on which to draw. So, as part of our study, we attempted to identify key studies conducted outside the UK that might act as exemplars. We have been able to draw heavily on a recent international review of the birth cohort studies conducted as part of the development work for Life Study (Kiernan, 2016). In addition, we have reviewed the methodologies employed by a number of studies of *separated* families. Our international search of these studies has been far from exhaustive. In comparison with elsewhere (notably Australia and the US, where much of the work we review has been conducted), we are hampered in the UK by the absence of a comprehensive sampling frame of separated families and this limits the degree to which lessons learnt from these international studies are applicable to the UK. Rather, perhaps the key contribution that these studies can make is to provide a number of rich question modules on various aspects of separated family life, often more detailed and nuanced that currently available in a UK context.

Here, we draw out the key learning point relevant to our scoping study.

3.11.1 Birth cohort studies

Key learning points:

- A number of the birth cohort studies (e.g. Growing Up in Ireland, US Fragile Families study) included a range of questions on post-separation parenting not available in the UK cohorts that could be replicated or adapted in a UK birth cohort study including both resident and non-resident parents.

- In Section 3.2.1, we discussed the drawbacks of using birth cohort studies (compared to longitudinal household panel studies) to research experiences of and outcomes from family separation. However, a number of cohort studies in other countries simultaneously run *two* age cohort studies. For instance, both the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (or Growing Up in Australia) and the US Early Childhood Longitudinal Study recruited a 'baby cohort' and a 'kindergarten cohort'. (Within the UK context, Growing Up in Scotland, discussed in Section 4, has employed a similar approach.) This might be a useful model to consider for a UK-wide study designed to look specifically at issues around family separation and its impact at various stages of a child's life. However, in order to generate timely data, we might need to consider more than two age cohorts, and/or a bigger gap in ages (e.g. pregnancy/birth and age 8 or 9) as was done in the Growing Up in Ireland study.

- A few cohort studies have made efforts to include non-resident parents, but with varying success and limited learning for a UK context. Notably, some (e.g. the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children, US Early Childhood Longitudinal Study) restricted their recruitment to fathers *in contact* with their children. Although there are methodological (greater likelihood of engaging in the study) and substantive (more likely to influence child

outcomes) reasons for doing so, we would want to consider whether limiting the study to 'contact-fathers' is appropriate in the UK context. One important consideration is that 'contact' versus 'no contact' is not a constant state over time, with some non-resident parents making and losing contact over a child's life (Haux et al, 2014; Philip, 2012).

- Most studies that involved non-resident parents struggled to obtain good response rates from them. The Étude Longitudinale Française Depuis L'Enfance (ELFE) is a good example of a study that placed equal weight in recruiting both parents, from whom consents were sought at the outset. However, only 16 per cent of non-resident parents responded at the two-month survey and 21 per cent at the one-year survey. The best example in terms of non-resident parent response rate is the US Fragile Families Survey, which included 61 per cent of non-resident parents at birth and around 50 per cent each wave up to when the child was five years old. However, the investment of time and cost (including high incentives) mean that it would be very hard to replicate this in the context of UK research budgets.

- Interviewer-administered surveys, rather than postal self-completion, appear to achieve much better response rates among non-resident parents (e.g. among non-resident parents for whom the resident parent provided contact details, the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children achieved only a 24 per cent response rate to a postal survey, but 78 per cent by phone in the next wave).

- The cohort studies that attempted to involve non-resident parents relied on resident parents providing their contact details or passing on recruitment information to them.

3.11.2 Studies of separated families

Key learning points:

- A number of studies (notably the Australian Longitudinal Study of Separated Families and the New Families in the Netherlands Study) included a range of modules on family separation that provide a valuable platform for any future UK data collection.

- Most studies we looked at used relatively comprehensive databases of separated families. The Australian Family Pathways studies include a range of longitudinal and cross-sectional studies, all drawn from Child Support Agency records (which in Australia cover a large majority of the separated families with children). The New Families in the Netherlands Survey accessed government records on divorced couples and those dissolving cohabitations. We have no comparable databases in the UK, which limits our learning from these studies in terms of sampling and recruitment.

- A number of studies attempted to recruit both parents from separated families. They were successful in only a minority of cases (around a fifth in the Australian studies and a third in the New Families in the Netherlands Survey). However, the value in this approach is immense in terms of being able to understand the experiences and outcomes for both parents. It is something we would seek to replicate in any future studies in the UK.

- The suite of Australian studies on family separation included 'offshoot' studies, interviewing young people whose parents had separated and grandparents, to look at the wider experience and effects of separation. Again, these provide useful models for any more holistic study of separation in the UK. Similarly, the US Fragile Families study included a number of 'add-on' qualitative and quantitative studies, highlighting the value of capitalizing on the engagement of panel members.

4 What types of data do we have?

4.1 Introduction

Our review of the existing evidence has identified the following types of data on separation:

- Government-held or court-held administrative data;
- Large-scale longitudinal surveys which track households or age cohorts over time;
- Large-scale, multi-purpose, repeat cross-sectional surveys;
- One-off studies (or infrequent repeat studies) or evaluations focusing on issues related to family separation.[37]

In this section, we describe the key features of each of these data sources, highlighting their strengths and shortcomings in terms of addressing the evidence needs identified in Section 2, and taking into account the methodological issues raised in Section 3. In Section 5, we draw on each of these evidence sources in summarising how far the research questions raised can be addressed by existing data.

4.2 Administrative data sources

There is a wide range of administrative data sources that can be made available to researchers, but, as noted above, very few of them identify separated parents. This largely rules out their use as *stand-alone* resources for research into separation. However, if linked to other data sources, in particular to surveys, then they can be extremely useful. And if in the future it proved possible to construct an administrative data panel of households or families that did identify separation, linking many of the existing administrative datasets to this panel would create an extremely valuable research resource.

We limit ourselves here to a short description of the administrative datasets that do identify some separated parents. Several other major administrative datasets, such as the National Pupil Database (England and Wales) Educational Attainment data (Scotland and Northern Ireland), Hospital Episode Statistics, and DWP and HMRC records, that could provide key outcome data for separated parents and their children, but these would need to be linked to a dataset that identifies separated parents and their children before they could be of use.

4.2.1 DWP/HMRC records for lone parents on benefit/tax credits

Longitudinal records for individuals in receipt of benefits are maintained by DWP, and are routinely linked to HMRC records on employment spells and income. Lone parents in receipt of benefits are identified in the dataset. Similarly, the status of households and families in

[37] As noted above, we concentrate largely on quantitative data collection, with qualitative studies highlighted where they form the core of any evidence on a particular issue or population.

receipt of tax credits as a lone parent or couple parent is recorded, and changes in household structure, including separations, are identifiable.

For researchers interested in outcomes for this *sub-group* of separated parents, the DWP/HMRC datasets would allow for tracking of future benefits and employment. It is also possible to link the data to other administrative datasets, such as the National Pupil Database, to track education outcomes for the children of the identified parents, and to NHS records, to track NHS usage for adults and children. This dataset only includes separated parents with main responsibility for their child and who needs, and is able, to apply for State support. It therefore represents a very particular sub-group of separated parents.

4.2.2 Court records

For private[38] family law cases in England and Wales, basic information about the case are recorded by HMCTS court staff on the 'FamilyMan' database. More detail on children's cases is accessible on the Cafcass Electronic Case Management System (ECMS). These management databases capture the main information collected on the application forms for each case, plus records of case progress through the court process. This information is relatively scant so, dependent on the research question, it may mean that the database is mainly of use as a sampling frame for more detailed case reviews using court files. If the research questions require information that is not recorded either on the database or in the case notes, then a survey or follow-up qualitative interviews may be needed. The Cafcass ECMS has been used as a sampling frame (Trinder et al, 2011). However, as far as we are aware, no surveys have to date been carried out using FamilyMan as a sampling frame, although a feasibility of doing so was recently conducted (Bryson et al, 2014).

Going beyond the purely administrative data, some research projects have used court files as a data source for snapshot empirical studies of particular issues in family law. Recent examples of studies in England and Wales using court file data include Harding and Newnham's (2015) study of child arrangements orders, Hitchings, Miles and Woodward's (2013) study of financial settlements on divorce, Woodward's (2014) project focused on pension orders and Trinder's current study of no fault and contested divorces.[39] These studies use FamilyMan as a simple sampling frame, for example, to produce all cases of a particular type that were started, or concluded, after or before a particular point in time. However, the subtlety and accuracy or otherwise of the sampling that is possible depends on the field codes that are used in FamilyMan to mark the occurrence of certain "events" in the life of a case – and those codes are determined by the administrative requirements of the court, which do not necessarily correspond with the interests of researchers.

So there is no substitute for examining the court files themselves. But conducting such research raises specific ethical issues and special permissions have to be obtained from the relevant Court Service and senior judiciary in order to access the data. Court file research is a time-consuming and laborious exercise, not just for the researchers but also for court staff who will be asked to identify and produce the files required; a significant factor in deciding whether to grant access to researchers is the practical burden posed on staff by the research request. It is

[38] I.e. disputes arising between family members, as opposed to 'public law' cases, where the state intervenes in family life in order to protect children at risk of harm.
[39] http://findingfault.org.uk

important also to bear in mind that the story told by the files is often incomplete in various respects, either because data is either missing from or ambiguously presented on the file. Or it may simply be the case that data on the issue in which the researcher is interested would not reach the court file, given the particular requirements of the legal proceedings in question. Most importantly, the concluded court file will bring a much longer story to an abrupt end – the longer term outcomes for those families will be unknowable from this source, as may much of the story pre-dating the proceedings.

Assuming that access and a suitable sample can be obtained, court files are undoubtedly a unique and valuable source of data about the lives of that small minority of separating families who find themselves using the court. Although they do constitute a minority of all separating families, those using the court system are an important client group whose experiences are central to key aspects of family justice policy. It is they, after all, who are most likely to be subjected to the governing legal norms and processes, whereas the rest, left to private ordering, may or may not organise their post-separation lives by reference to those norms.

It is important to note that there are plans to replace FamilyMan over the next few years with a bespoke HMCTS system as part of the Court Modernisation Programme. The likelihood is that the new system will be designed with a greater focus on capturing management information data and linkage between administrative data systems. As yet, however, there is very little detail available about the nature of the proposed systems. We suspect that the replacement systems will be more relevant to researchers, at least in comparison to FamilyMan, but its focus will remain restricted to a very distinct sub-set of separated parents and will be likely to share many of the common disadvantages of administrative data identified elsewhere in this section.

4.2.3 Child Maintenance Service records

The Child Maintenance Service (CMS) holds records on separated parents who enter the statutory system. These are valuable as a sampling source for surveys and other research because they hold contact details of both the resident and non-resident parent. Importantly this creates the potential for paired interviews, and for research among non-resident parents who will be representative of the sub-group involved with the CMS (avoiding the problems described in Section 3 around self-identification). However, only a proportion of separated parents have any contact with the CMS, and those who do tend to be those less able to make family-based child support arrangements. Moreover, the introduction of charging for use of the system and a general encouragement to use the CMS only as a last resort means that the CMS records going forward will include a smaller proportion, and increasing unrepresentative sample, of all separated parents. So, while it is a good sampling source for that sub-group of the population (and, indeed is used for a range of DWP studies on child support), it cannot be used to identify the separated parent population as a whole. This is in contrast to other parts of the world, where use of the statutory child support system is close to universal.

CMS records are also used to produce quarterly government statistics on the use of the system, the levels of child support due, payment history and family circumstances. While useful for tracking the number and profile of CMS users, as well as some level of compliance with the arrangement, they collected only limited data. In particular, they present cases by the non-resident parent only (i.e. a father with non-resident children with two different mothers is

recorded as just one case), they assume that all Direct Pay cases are completely compliant (i.e. that cases where the service does not make collection are all paid on time and in full) and they do not detail any enforcement mechanisms applied by the CMS to ensure payment.

4.3 Large-scale longitudinal studies

The need for longitudinal data to address many of the evidence needs around family separation means that the best current data sources are often large-scale longitudinal surveys that track families over time. The UK boasts a rich history of birth cohort studies, some UK-wide (1946, 1958 and 1970 cohorts and the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS)), some country-specific (e.g. Growing Up in Scotland (GUS)) and others region-specific (e.g. Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (ALSPAC), Born in Bradford (BiB)). In addition, the UK has an invaluable evidence base from its household panel studies: the UKHLS and its predecessor British Household Panel Study and the DWP-funded longitudinal Families and Children Study (FACS) and from cohort studies not starting from birth (e.g. Next Steps which recruited children in 2004 at the age of 13/14).

Much of the published research on family separation uses the older birth cohorts and household panel studies. However, since our focus is the infrastructure going forward, our key interest is in studies that will continue to *generate* new data about separated families with children *currently* of dependent age.[40] So, in this section we spend some time describing the two key UK surveys which are currently the cornerstones of the data infrastructure providing evidence on family separation:

- The UK Household Longitudinal Survey, or 'Understanding Society' (UKHLS)
- The Millennium Cohort Study (MCS)

We also provide some detail about three country- and region-specific birth cohort studies that have either generated recent data or continue to generate relevant data although, for some, their original cohort members are no longer dependent children. These are the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (ALSPAC), Growing Up in Scotland (GUS), and Born in Bradford (BiB).

4.3.1 The UK Household Longitudinal Survey (UKHLS)

Overview

The UKHLS currently provides the most comprehensive longitudinal survey data on the lives of the UK population including a representative group of UK families with dependent children, both intact and separated. With waves of data from 2009 onwards, the data may be used to form annual cross-sectional samples, with appropriate filtering and weighting. It has a number of key attributes that make it a strong dataset for studying family separation: large numbers (around 11,000 households with dependent children among the 30,000 households included

[40] That said, as the MCS and Next Steps cohorts age and have children in the coming years, they will each provide a population of parents who can be tracked over time, with the potential to include their children and their children's other parent in the study (as it being done with the ALSPAC cohort).

in wave 1, 2009/10[41]), providing a good sample size of separated families; relatively frequent (annual and continuous) data collection; a range of data on family life pre- and post-separation; and the continued collection of data from parents and partners who leave the original household, including data about and from their new household members. It can be combined with its parent survey, the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS), to provide a longer time series. The BHPS ran annually from 1991, collecting 18 waves of data before being merged into the (larger) UKHLS. The length of the time series means that the two surveys are extremely valuable for analysing family separation, although the BHPS's rather more limited data collection on post-separation circumstances and considerably smaller sample size (starting with 5,500 British households) means that we have a richer set of data since the UKHLS was launched in 2009.

Although, in our view, the UKHLS provides the *best available* longitudinal data for studying family separation, there are a number of issues that constrain how far the study can be used to address the full range of research questions we have identified on the lives of separating and separated families. Firstly, the numbers of families who separate *each year* is small, and so despite its large overall sample size, this limits certain types of analysis (e.g. the process of separating, experiences in light of particular policy changes, etc., changes in pre- and post-separation circumstances) without aggregating several years of data. Secondly, the proportion of non-resident parents who continue to take part post-separation is low, resulting in small numbers and potential sample bias among this group. Thirdly, although the study includes a good selection of questions useful for the study of family separation, its multi-topic nature means that it lacks the depth and granularity required, particularly in terms of the process of separating, transition periods and outcomes.

In this section, we provide more detail on what can be answered well using the UKHLS, and the gaps in evidence that remain. We report on discussions with the UKHLS team about how far these gaps could be plugged by building on the current UKHLS. We return to these in Section 6, when we discuss potential methods of new data collection.

The UKHLS survey methodology

The UKHLS is a longitudinal panel survey launched in 2009. Since then, the study has been attempting to track household members from 30,000 households across the UK at wave 1,[42] via various data collection methods: annual face-to-face interviews (with self-completion

[41] At wave 1 of the UKHLS, there were 20,418 dependent children (DWP definition) identified, living in 10,946 different households. Results based on a_indall file. At wave 4 the corresponding figures are 16,246 children in 8,790 households. The number of people who would have been parents to a dependent child at any point during the first four years will be rather higher, of course.

[42] The study has four sample components: the General Population Component includes 26,000 UK households, sampled from the small user Postcode Address File, who were interviewed as part of the new UKHLS Panel in 2009/10, along with an Ethnic Minority GB Boost interviewed sample of 4,000 households. (The main data files include both the GPC and EMB, with weights available to provide a representative sample of the UK population.) From wave 2 (2010/11), the existing 8,400 British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) members joined the UKHLS panel as a third component. It is worth noting that some of these BHPS respondents are from boost samples for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, in addition to the original 1991 GB sample. In addition to these three main panel components, a separate Innovation Panel of 1,500 households is interviewed each year (but their data are not included as part of the main datasets). Our figures are based on varying samples, made clear at each point, but with a focus on the wave 1 households and their members in particular.

elements) with each household member aged 16 and over, and self-completion questionnaires for those aged 10 to 15; the collection of biomarker data; and consent to access a range of administrative[43] data about the panel members. Currently, six waves of data are available for analysis, with subsequent waves of data to be released annually.[44]

Within each household, one adult is asked to complete a 15-minute household interview, which collects data about the household structure and other 'household-level' information. Each household member aged 16 and over is then asked to take part in a 40-minute interview, which includes some self-completion elements (now collected by computer). Proxy information may be collected about any adults not interviewed within a participating household. Young people aged 10 to 15 are asked to complete their own 10-minute questionnaire.

From wave 2 onwards, interviews are attempted with all wave 1 panel members. This is regardless of whether they are still in the same household or have moved (within the UK). In addition, anyone who has moved into the original household is eligible to be interviewed (for as long as they remain in a household with a panel member) as well as anyone living in the household of any panel members who have moved (again only for as long as they remain living with that panel member). Thus, in terms of research into family separation, the UKHLS continues to track parents who no longer live with their children. It also collects data on step-parents (both those with whom the child lives and partners of non-resident parents) and new children and step-children.

In wave 1, 57 per cent of issued eligible households in the main sample took part in the survey. Within households responding at wave 1, 81 per cent of adults were interviewed or had proxy data collected. The response rates to subsequent waves among those participating in wave 1 has been high (over 80 per cent). At this point, the panel has not been refreshed, although a new Immigrant and Ethnic Minority Boost sample was added in 2015 to ensure that the panel represents those who have moved into the UK since 2009.

Sample sizes and sample bias among separated families with dependent children

The first wave of the UKHLS in 2009/10 provided a representative cross-section at that time of 3,851 resident parent households. Although there were no *specific* questions to identify resident parent households, they can be identified by dint of including a child who lives with only one parent.[45] From wave 2 onwards, new resident parents can be identified via changes in household structure (e.g. the other parent leaving the household or dying, and new children being born and (immediately or later) living with only one parent).

[43] Consent has been sought to link to the National Pupil Database (England and Wales) and Educational Attainment data (Scotland and Northern Ireland), Higher Education Statistics Agency data, Hospital Episode Statistics, NHD Central Register, DWP data on participation in government schemes, HMRC data on employment, NI contributions, income and tax credits, DVLA records on vehicle registration.

[44] Although panel members are interviewed annually, the collection of data for each wave takes place over two years, so that in any year two waves of data are being collected.

[45] Many questions on post-separation circumstances (e.g. child maintenance) are asked only of (legal) parents (not step-parents).

The sample design of the UKHLS (that is, starting with a cross-section of households, and interviewing everyone in that household) means that the non-resident parents of the 3,851 resident parent households at wave 1 were not included in the study. However, in wave 1, 1,357 UKHLS panel members identified themselves as being the non-resident parent of children (aged 16 or younger) in households outside the panel.

Clearly, one would expect very similar numbers of resident parents and non-resident parents in the sample (perhaps slightly fewer non-resident parents, as the death of the other parent will account for a few of the resident parent households[46]). We assume that the disparity in numbers (with nearly three times as many resident parents as non-resident parents in wave 1) means that the UKHLS suffers from similar problems as other studies (e.g. Peacey and Hunt, 2008; Wikeley et al, 2008), with a good proportion of non-resident parents not declaring themselves as being as such in response to questions about children they have outside their current household.[47] This assumption is supported by our analysis of wave 3, when the first detailed module of questions on contact and maintenance was added. The responses of the non-resident parents suggest that as a group they are skewed towards those who are more engaged in the lives of their children.[48]

So, for the purposes of cross-sectional analysis and tracking over time, the UKHLS provides a good-sized sample of resident parent households, and a reasonable (though skewed) sample of non-resident parents. However, the vast majority of these separated families were already separated at the start of the panel. The numbers of two-parent households with dependent children who subsequently separated are limited. Looking at the early waves of the survey, we calculate that 2.1 per cent of families with dependent children separate between each wave (119 families between waves 1 and 2). In only 71 per cent (84) of these cases did at least one parent take part in the wave 2 survey; and in only 29 per cent of these cases (35) did *both* parents take part.

So, we have limited data on families who have separated since the start of the panel, and most of this comes from the resultant resident parent with very high levels of attrition from non-resident parents. Even aggregating data over several waves provides limited numbers of resident parents from families separating since the start of the panel, and very small and biased samples of non-resident parents. As a result, the UKHLS sample is limited in what it can support in terms of analysis on:

- The circumstances and perspectives of a representative sample of non-resident parents (especially those for whom we have pre-separation data or data from the resident parent and their children);
- The effect of policy changes on separating and separated families;

[46] This information was not asked in wave 1.

[47] As part of the UKHLS Innovation Panel, we are working with the UKHLS to test whether the proportion and profile of non-resident parents self-identifying can be improved.

[48] Over 60 per cent of these self-identified non-resident parents reported paying child support, whilst only 37 per cent of (the separate cross-section of) resident parents said that they received it. Among non-resident parents, only 11 per cent said they never saw their child, and 61 per cent said they had contact at least weekly. The resident parent responses (for term-time contact) suggested no contact in around 33 per cent of cases, and weekly or more regular contact for 37 per cent (plus a further three per cent of children were old enough to make their own arrangements).

- The experience of the separation process;
- Separated families' pre-separation circumstances.

Interview content

The UKHLS contains a wealth of useful information with which to study the lives of separated families. Its particular strengths are:

- Its longitudinal design means that it provides data on the pre-separation lives of families who later separate (although, as shown above, the majority of the separated families in the panel at the moment had separated prior to the start of the panel).
- Albeit with the caveats above, it provides data from the perspective of both resident parents and non-resident parents. It also provides data collected directly from children and young people aged 10 and over.
- It provides data on both the separated families and their new families, including step-parents, step-children and new children (although sample sizes are currently small for non-resident parents). The demographic information on these families is very detailed.
- It has the capacity to link to a range of administrative data, which would allow for the tracking of a range of outcomes even if the panel member no longer takes part in the interviews.
- It provides a range of data (from the perspectives of resident and non-resident parents and children) on contact, financial support and relationships between parents and between parents and children.
- The retrospective life history data contains a full record of relationships.

However, given its multi-topic focus, the UKHLS will clearly always be limited in the amount of data it can collect about family life in general and family separation in particular. Currently, the key gaps are:

- Data on contact and maintenance are only collected every two years (and contact data are collected in different ways from non-resident parents and resident parents).
- Each wave provides a 'snapshot' of the lives of separated families. There is limited potential to understand transitions, processes and reasons for change between data collection points.
- The study collects very little about the process or experience of separation (including the reasons for the separation).
- Beyond use of the statutory child maintenance system, it contains little on the statutory, legal and voluntary support parents used when separating or to resolve issues post-separation. Data on use of these services are required both in order to understand the effect of policy changes around these issues, and to understand the process of separation.
- There is little to understand how parents parent after separation, such as co-parenting styles/practices and decision-making.
- Although the current questions measure the prevalence of contact and financial support, further questions would be required fully to understand these issues. We understand that the UKHLS team has reviewed the questions on child maintenance to track contact and

maintenance arrangements under the new legal and statutory frameworks and the increased emphasis on private arrangements.
- For families separated at the start of the panel (who form the majority), there is limited information on pre-separation arrangements.

4.3.3 The Millennium Cohort Study

The MCS is the most comprehensive (relatively) up-to-date dataset for studying the *outcomes* of children experiencing separation during childhood.[49]

MCS overview

The MCS has been tracking around 19,000 children born in the UK in 2001/1. It provides a wealth of data on the lives of children growing up in the first decades of 21st century, including robust sample sizes of those experiencing family separation during their childhood. The study's primary aim is to track the cohort's outcomes throughout their lives – and to collect the data necessary to understand how different pathways and life experiences affect those outcomes. As such, it provides a rich dataset for understanding the pathways and outcomes of children who experience family separation – with a wide range of outcomes and explanatory variables – with reasonable sample sizes of children experiencing separation at different ages. For most of those experiencing separation (with the exception of those whose parents were never together or had separated by the first interview), data are available both prior to and post-separation.

However, several issues constrain how far the MCS can be used to address the full range of research questions we have identified on the lives of separating and separated families with children:
- By dint of the birth cohort design, the children are all growing up within the same policy timeframe and same period of change (e.g. recession, education changes, etc.) making it impossible to separate out the timing of the separation from other changes over that time.
- Necessarily given the birth cohort model, the children in the survey are broadly of the same age, preventing evaluation of the impact of different policies on children of different ages. Specifically, the MCS birth cohort are now approaching their late teens and, so, for recent or future policy changes, the MCS cannot provide data on the effects of these on younger children.[50]
- The MCS does not collect any data from parents who do not live in the child's household at the time of each interview. As such, unlike the ULHLS, if parents separate, no data are collected from the non-resident parent. All data about the separation, post-separation parenting, and arrangements are collected from the perspective of the resident parent (and, as children get older, the children themselves).
- While there is a wealth of data collected on parenting by the parents living with the child – and resident partners – the data collected on post-separation parenting is more limited. For instance, researchers are restricted to using questions around frequency of contact as

[49] Prior to its cancellation, Life Study had been expected to provide additional, and more current, data on children experiencing family separation from 2015 onwards.
[50] However, as mentioned above, in theory as the cohort becomes parents, it has the potential to provide a longitudinal sample of parents and, if recruited, other family members.

proxies for non-resident parent involvement, with little information about co-parenting and the quality of the parent-child relationship. There is very little data on the experiences of separation and negotiations of separated parents either at the time of separation or over the longer term.

- The duration of time between sweeps (up to four years between more recent sweeps) restricts the ability to look at the experiences or short-term effects of family separation, or attempt to link to the policy cycle.

The methodology of the MCS

The MCS is a cohort, sampled from HMRC Child Benefit records, of children born to families resident in the UK between late 2000 and early 2002. Families were first interviewed when the child was about nine months old, with five further waves of data collection so far, when the child was aged three, five, seven, 11 and 14 years old, with the age 17 wave currently in the planning.

At each sweep up until now, the primary carer (usually mother) has provided the main interview, conducted in-home using computer-assisted interviewing, including a short self-completion element. From age 7, the children have also completed questionnaires. At the next sweep (age 17), the child becomes the main respondent, with the main carer interview supplementary. At each sweep, a shorter interview and self-completion are conducted with any resident partners of the primary carer, with proxy data sometimes collected from the main respondent where resident parents/partners are unable to take part themselves. Both parents (from the age 3 time point onwards) and teachers (age 5 onwards) are asked to complete standard assessments of the children, and consent is sought from parents to link to the child's educational records.

With the exception of a pilot in Wave 3,[51] non-resident parents are not interviewed within the MCS. In the initial sweep, 17 per cent of children were not living with their other parent (nearly always the father). In subsequent sweeps, partners/fathers who leave the household are no longer eligible to be interviewed.[52] So, at each wave, the MCS provides data on resident fathers, as well as step-fathers, but nothing (directly) from non-resident fathers.

[51] In the piloting stage of wave 3, the MCS team tested whether it might be feasible to collect some data from non-resident parents. In situations where the non-resident parent was in contact with their child, interviewers asked the main carer for the contact details of the non-resident parent in order to send him a self-completion questionnaire. In cases where the main carer was reticent to give out contact information, she was asked if she would be willing to pass on the questionnaire to the non-resident parent. The pilot results were not encouraging, and the methodology was not pursued in the main stage. Among the 22 eligible households identified in the pilot, five mothers refused to provide details or pass the questionnaire to the non-resident father. Among the other 17 households, less than half of the mothers provided the non-resident father's address, with the others passing on the questionnaire directly (which counts out the possibility of sending reminders). Only three fathers returned the questionnaire (after a reminder in the case of those with addresses provided).

[52] That said, partners are defined as resident – or at least eligible for interview – if they stay overnight at least one or two nights each week. So, in effect, the MCS collects data from partners whose permanent residence may be elsewhere, but who have a regular overnight presence in the child's home; but this group is not separately identifiable in the datasets.

Response rates to the MCS are high. Around 80 per cent of eligible sampled families took part in the first sweep of the survey and in each subsequent sweep around 80 per cent of those approached have taken part. At the end of sweep 5 (when the children were 11), around half (54 per cent) of families have taken part in all sweeps, with a further 20 per cent having interrupted response patterns[53] (Mostafa, 2014). The response rate to the partner interview has also remained high and stable (e.g. in wave 5, 87 per cent of eligible partners were interviewed in households where the main carer participated). Response is higher in more advantaged wards and in wards with a lower BME density.

Sample size of children whose parents separate after sweep 1

The MCS provides reasonable sample sizes of families who had split between each sweep (with sweep intervals varying between 2 years 3 months and 4 years). Here, we cite figures from Haux et al (2015) who analysed data from 14,329 children who were living with both parents at sweep 1 (and were not one of twins or other multiple births). Among these, 2,758 (19 per cent) had experienced their parents' separation by the age of 11:

- 795 experienced separation between 9 months and three years;
- 797 experienced separation between 3 and 5 years;
- 476 experienced separation between 5 and 7 years;
- 720 experienced separation between 7 and 11 years.

The MCS also includes over 4,000 children whose parents were not together in sweep 1. Whilst these could be included in any analysis on family separation, there are two reasons for caution. From a substantive perspective, the family situation of these children is particular: their parents were never together or separated soon after the birth (see Kiernan and Mensah, 2010). And from a research perspective, these families do not provide any data on the circumstances and relationships prior to separation.

Interview content

The MCS provides a wealth of useful information with which to study the lives of separated families. Its particular strengths are:

- Its longitudinal design means that it provides data on the pre-separation lives of families who later separate.
- It provides data not only from mothers, but from resident fathers/partners and children as well. As the children age, the balance between maternal report and collecting data directly from the young people is shifting.
- It provides data on the involvement of step-parents who live with the children.
- It has the capacity to link to a range of administrative data that would allow for the tracking of a range of outcomes. Currently, linked data are available with the child's education records as well as their birth registration and maternity notes.
- It provides a wealth of outcome data for children across the age range. These include maternal and teacher report, as well as standardized tests with the children measuring their educational and socio-emotional development. These kinds of outcome data make it a much richer data source than the UKHLS for looking at the effect of separation on children.

[53] The remaining 26 per cent participated in a number of waves before dropping out altogether.

- It provides a rich set of data on the relationships, circumstances, parental involvement and parenting styles within intact families. However, the data on families post-separation are less rich, particularly in relation to the non-resident parents' involvement in their child's life. The MCS interview continues to focus on the involvement and relationships of people living within the child's household.
- Non-resident parents' contact with their child is only measured in terms of frequency of contact and – in later waves – type of contact, and in the frequency of the child staying with him overnight.
- There are very few data to measure the quality of the contact that non-resident parents have with their children – what they do together, how the non-resident parent/child feel about the time they spend together, and so on.
- Equally, there are few data to measure how far – and how well – parents co-parent after separation. So, it is not possible to know how involved non-resident parents are in making decisions about their child's life (schooling, health, and so on), and how well parents manage this process.
- Likewise, the data on child maintenance and financial support are limited.
- Few data are collected about the circumstances in which parents separate (bar the reason for the separation), or how that process was negotiated and post-separation arrangements are made (involvement of the courts, support, etc.). The MCS is a good source of data for looking at the outcomes of children experiencing separation, but does not provide a good understanding of the pathways that families take to separation and after separation, or relationships post-separation.

4.3.4 Contemporaneous country- and region-specific birth cohort studies in the UK

Growing Up in Scotland

GUS is a longitudinal cohort study funded by the Scottish Government and run by ScotCen. There have been three cohorts (each sampled from Child Benefit Records): two on-going birth cohorts that began in 2004 (sample size 5,000) and 2010 (sample size 6,000), and a 3,000 cohort of children that ran from 2002 to 2007, tracking them from age 3 to age 6. With the exception of one wave, interviews have been conducted with the main carer (almost always the mother) with any information about partners/fathers collected by proxy. For example, the 2010 cohort study collects information from the mother about the non-resident fathers on: frequency and type of contact; level of interest he shows in the child; payments towards child maintenance; the organisation of contact arrangements and the involvement of the NRS in decisions concerning the child. A key advantage of GUS is the young age of the 2010 cohort (in comparison with, say, the MCS). However, the numbers of families separating over the course of the study will limit any analysis of family separation.

The Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (ALSPAC)

ALSPAC began in the early 1990s, with the aim of establishing how genetic and environmental characteristics influence health and development in parents and children. As such, it provides a much richer set of health data than the other cohort studies in the UK. Nearly 14,000 women

were recruited in pregnancy in a defined area in the South West of England. These women have been followed over the last 19 to 22 years. Data collected from fathers are limited. Until the last few years, all contact has been via the mother, with limited (self-completion) questionnaire data. In recent years, the team has been recruiting fathers directly into the study, with growing numbers involved (now around 30 per cent). There are no data on the representativeness of fathers enrolling to the study. However, anecdotally, they perceive greater levels of participation among biological fathers and from middle income households.

In addition, the team is now recruiting the original birth cohort members who become parents into a new study of their children (CoCo90s). And as part of this study, the team is also recruiting the child's other parent. Although the numbers are currently small, this will be an important study to monitor – for both methodological and substantive interest – to see how successfully they manage to recruit non-resident parents.

Born in Bradford Study (BiB)

BiB commenced in pregnancy and was set up to examine how genetic, environmental behavioural and social factors impact on children's health and development. Recruitment of the cohort ran from March 2007 to December 2010 with nearly 14,000 mothers recruited ante-natally. Given the demographic profile of the local population, around half of the mothers recruited were Asian. Half of all the families were in the poorest quintile of the deprivation index for England and Wales. The BiB team has now launched a second cohort study (supported by the Big Lottery Fund's A Better Start Programme), recruiting 5,000 pregnant mothers between 2016 and 2020 in deprived wards of Bradford. Mothers, children and resident partners will be tracked over time using a baseline survey and administrative data, providing data on a very recent cohort of children. However, the demographic profile of families in Bradford means that fewer families than the national average will be separated.

4.4 Large-scale multipurpose repeat cross-sectional surveys

Some large-scale multipurpose cross-sectional studies can be used to look at particular aspects of family separation. Their cross-sectional nature means that – where they are repeated – they can provide a profile of families at a particular point in time, and track how this changes over time, but they cannot (unlike the longitudinal studies) track the *same* families over time to explore families' trajectories and outcomes.

Perhaps the most used study of this nature is the DWP's Family Resources Study, a continuous survey of 20,000 UK households each year to track financial circumstances. Its cross-sectional nature means that it does not suffer from non-response bias (unlike the UKHLS) which makes it arguably better as a 'snapshot' profiling tool. However, although the study collects a wealth of data on families' financial resources, its questions on child support are less detailed than those included in the UKHLS (or other bespoke studies on the financial circumstances of separated families) and they provide little scope to explore financial issues alongside other issues pertinent to family separation.

Two other important cross-section repeat studies that can be used to look at specific aspects of the lives of separated families are:

- The Time Use Survey, repeated very intermittently (last in 2015), asks UK households to record what they were doing over the course of two days, and with whom. These data can be used to look at the everyday lives of separated families, including both adults and children. However, the diary data do not allow us to measure time spent between non-resident parents and their children.

- The Child and Adolescent Mental Health Surveys allow us to measure the mental health of children and young people in different family settings, and how this is changing over time. The latest survey will take place in 2017. However, as we understand, there are limited data to allow us to understand the links between mental health and family formation (e.g. around parenting and contact).

Other studies that allow us to look at a specific issue by family structure include: the Poverty and Social Exclusions Survey; Health Survey for England; the Childcare and Early Years' Survey of Parents; the Maternity and Paternity Rights and Women Returners Survey (this list is by no means exhaustive). However, all of these are limited in their ability to provide a holistic view of the lives of separated families. Rather, they allow us to explore straightforward cross-sectional associations between family formation and the focus of the study.

4.5 Other one-off studies related to family separation

In Section 5, we summarise the extent to which the current data (or that collected in the past ten years) can address the range of evidence needs we articulated in Section 2. In many cases, the studies we point to are those described above: the large-scale longitudinal studies and repeat cross-sections. In other cases, we highlight the value of a range of one-off studies related to family separation – or specific issues relevant to the lives or outcomes of separating and separated families.

These one-off studies are largely commissioned by government departments to address particular policy needs. By contrast with our primary focus on quantitative (rather than qualitative) data, these studies include both evaluations and more descriptive surveys. A smaller number of studies have been funded by grant-giving organisations such as the Nuffield Foundation and the ESRC.[54]

These studies provide important, but piecemeal, information on various aspects of the lives of sub-groups of separated families. We see their main value as providing:

- A *depth* of information on particular issues related to separation that cannot always be collected in multi-purpose studies;
- (Sometimes) a specific focus on a subset of separated families, including those who would only appear in very small numbers in any wider study of separated families (e.g. court users);

[54] As mentioned earlier, short methodological summaries of key studies are available from the authors on request.

- (Sometimes) a design which allows for a robust quasi-experimental measurement of the impact of a particular policy or intervention for separating and separated families.

However, on the other hand:

- Differences in time periods, methodologies, populations and foci mean they cannot collectively provide a comprehensive, up-to-date evidence base;
- Changes in law and policies (e.g. around child support, legal aid, welfare benefits) mean that the time period in which the data were collected is critical to the extent to which they continue to be relevant;
- (Commonly) a focus on a particular issue, without the inclusion of wider issues for separated families, limits the ability of these studies to provide a holistic picture – or to understand the focus of the study in the context of wider factors;
- In the main, the evidence is drawn from the published research reports, and the public availability of the underlying data is patchy.

We would expect government to continue to commission studies to address short-term information needs on particular policy or intervention questions (albeit potentially with more limited budgets to do so). Therefore, in thinking about the adequacy of the data infrastructure – both now and going forward – we concentrate on data that would provide the holistic picture of family relationships post-separation, which would answer the research questions that we have identified, and be publicly available to the research world and to the third sector.

5 How far can we address the evidence needs within the current data infrastructure?

5.1 Overview

In this section, we draw on the studies we have identified in Section 4 and summarise how far these provide recent evidence (within the past ten years) on the lives of separating and separated families. Note that our intention here is to highlight key available recent (or forthcoming) *data* rather than to summarise the findings from the studies. Beyond what is described here, there are numerous additional publications based on these highlighted studies, particularly the birth cohort and panel studies. Moreover, because of our focus on the future data infrastructure, studies using older data are not included here, despite their valuable contribution to the wider evidence base. The section is organised with the same sub-headings as Section 2.3, where we categorise the evidence needs.

5.2 Relationship breakdown and the transition into separation

Despite being a key area of interest, in both policy and research terms, family separation is an area where the current data infrastructure is particularly lacking. Few studies (with the notable exception of the MCS) even ask about the *reason* for the separation or about which parent instigated the split. And we found no studies which focused specifically on families who had recently separated (bar evaluations of support services focusing on this group). Studies of separated families tend to ask about circumstances at the point of interview, with little collected in the way of retrospective data. So, for respondents who have recently separated, it is possible to generate statistics about their current circumstances and arrangements (and, in longitudinal studies, to track how these change over time). However, we found no survey data that took a detailed look at how families dealt with the process of relationship breakdown and the transition into separation. This means there is a wide set of unanswered questions about the impact of different trajectories and how policy or practice could ameliorate any negative effects from this process.

5.3 Pre- and post-separation relationships and parenting

In earlier sections, we have identified the importance of understanding the associations between families' lives pre-separation and what happens during the separation process and post-separation. For this, we ideally need to look to longitudinal studies that provide data both pre- and post-separation.[55] With one to two per cent of families with dependent children separating each year, we need to look to the longitudinal studies with very large sample sizes

[55] While some studies (e.g. the UKHLS) collect retrospective data on relationship histories (the reliability of which is being explored by Brewer and Nandi), it is reasonable to question the reliability of retrospective questions on more subjective measures such as relationship quality and parenting styles.

in order to have sufficient data (and, even here, the numbers are limited): so, primarily the UKHLS (and BHPS) and the MCS.

Both the UKHLS and the MCS provide a wealth of data on pre-separation circumstances – family structure, income, employment, parenting, relationships. There are a number of key gaps in our knowledge that could be improved through minor changes in the questionnaire content of these studies: e.g. more data collected directly from fathers on their involvement; a better understanding of how couple households organise and divide their income. However, the principal shortcomings with these two studies lie in the small number of intact families who separate in subsequent waves (see Section 4) and the differential attrition among separated families. A further shortcoming arises from the less detailed information available on post-separation circumstances (see Section 5.4 onwards). Recent examples of studies using these data to look at the relationship between families' circumstances and outcomes pre- and post-separation are: Haux et al, 2015; Brewer and Nandi, 2016; Fisher and Low, 2016.

5.4 Post-separation living arrangements and contact

Within the current evidence base, post-separation involvement by non-resident parents is most often measured in terms of the *amount* of contact that they have with their children, both in terms of frequency of contact and number of overnight stays. The *prevalence* of contact and pattern of overnight stays is available (longitudinally and/or cross-sectionally) in a range of studies that ask respondents about post-separation family life. However, when measuring the quantity of contact, studies either conflate different ways in which non-resident parents could be in touch with their children into a generic measure of 'contact', or they focus solely on 'seeing' each other and ignore other forms of contact. Neither is sufficient, particularly in an age when there are diverse opportunities to deploy various methods for non-resident parents and children to keep in touch.

There are also issues with the frequency scales used to measure this contact, typically using a scale from 'every day' to 'never'. Although some studies differentiate between term-time and school holidays, the measures all tend to assume some form of regularity, which may not be applicable in all cases and which does not translate well for arrangements where children share their time equally, or something close to equally, between their two parents. While the occasional study includes a code for '50:50 shared care', this neither accounts for something a little less than 50:50, nor does it provide any information about *how* the child's time is divided between their parents' homes (e.g. alternate nights; alternate weeks; and so on).

So, we have data – though less than ideal – on quantity of contact. What is much less common is a more nuanced picture of the way in which contact arrangements are negotiated and maintained, how parents and children feel about these arrangements, the quality of the time that children spend with their non-resident parents, and how this changes over time. In general, there is very little evidence on how parents co-parent after separation. These measures of the *quality* of contact or involvement of the non-resident parent is a particular evidence gap given the body of research suggesting that the quality as well as the quantity of time has an impact on children's outcomes (Adamsons and Johnson, 2013).

5.4.1 Longitudinal data

Longitudinal data are required fully to understand the associations between non-resident parents' involvement in children's lives and their propensity to provide financial support, to have good relationships with their children, positive child outcomes, and so on. In terms of longitudinal data, the MCS and UKHLS are currently the best UK-wide data sources (although the country-specific and regional cohort studies also contribute). These two studies enable us to follow separated families' pathways post-separation in terms of their contact (albeit with the caveats above) and, to some extent, relationships. However, neither provide much data on the quality of that contact or the ways in which parents co-parent after separation. Nor do they explore the pathways and processes of how arrangements are made and maintained over time, as children age and family formations change. Rather, at each wave (every 2 to 4 years in MCS and every two years in UKHLS), the studies provide a snapshot of the families' current circumstances. Neither contains much data on the statutory, legal and voluntary support used when separating or to resolve issues post-separation, which are required both in order to understand the effect of policy changes around these issues and to understand the process of separation.

The MCS has limited data on post-separation parenting (largely focusing on frequency of contact and overnight stays), and, importantly, these data are collected solely from the resident parent (although, in later sweeps, information is collected from children on their relationship with their non-resident parent). There are very few data to measure the quality of the contact that non-resident parents have with their children – what they do together, how the non-resident parent/child feel about the time they spend together, and so on. Equally, there are few data to measure how far – and how well – parents co-parent after separation. So, it is not possible to know how involved non-resident parents are in making decisions about their child's life (schooling, health, and so on), and how well parents manage this process. Neither equal shared care arrangements (measured in terms of time spent with either parent) nor shared care (measured in terms of joint childrearing) is measured well. Two key studies recently drawing on these data are Haux et al, 2015 on links between pre-separation parenting and post-separation contact; and Goisis et al, 2016 on the relationship between child outcomes and post-separation contact.

The UKHLS provides somewhat more than the MCS on contact, post-separation relationships and related issues such as child maintenance (although, again, little on co-parenting). The cross-sectional nature of the original sample (including children of different ages), however, means that it is harder to ask age-appropriate questions on parenting across the sample. It asks questions of both resident and non-resident parents. In terms of equal shared care arrangements, it can identify parents who report having 50:50 care as well as measure it through the number of overnight stays per week. Still, like MCS, it contains very little in the way of data on how arrangements were negotiated and renegotiated over time. A recent example of the use of these data is by Poole et al (2015), reporting from the perspectives of non-resident parents.

5.4.2 One-off cross-sectional studies

Issues around contact have been explored in a lot more detail in a study conducted by Peacey and Hunt (2009). This study involved a survey of resident parents and non-resident parents

(identified through the ONS random probability omnibus) and qualitative interviews with resident parents and their children and non-resident parents, and so combines quantitative measures on patterns of contact and the factors associated with contact and contact frequency, with detailed accounts of families' contact arrangements and a particular focus on problems and how they were resolved. This study provides a snapshot (as a one-off study) of families' situations, although parents provided retrospective accounts of how contact arrangements had been made and played out over time. It is stronger than the longitudinal studies in terms of prevalence of particular situations (at that time) and understanding the pathways and processes. Although the data were collected prior to policy changes around statutory and court provision, the findings are currently still relevant about the issues that families face. That said, although the study is relatively unusual in providing the perspectives of non-resident parents, an acknowledged shortcoming of the study was a bias in the non-resident parents interviewed in the survey. Despite a number of questions to identify non-resident parents, it over-represented non-resident parents in contact with their children and better relations with those children (as do the UKHLS and other studies attempting similar approaches to the identification of non-resident parents). So, while it provides valuable data from non-resident parents on their experiences, prevalence figures on contact patterns are more accurately measured from the reports from the resident parents. Similar studies using samples from the ONS omnibus were conducted in 2003 and 2008 (e.g. Lader, 2008). The Kids Aren't Free (Bryson et al, 2013) study provided a similar range of qualitative and quantitative data from single parents on benefit (all resident parents).

5.5 Child maintenance, income and other financial support from non-resident parents

A key consideration when assessing the available data on child maintenance and the financial support from non-resident parents is the major changes to the statutory system which have occurred in 2008, 2010 and, most importantly, from 2014 onwards (see Section 1). Since 2008, the profile and number of families negotiating arrangements through the statutory system and the courts will have changed substantially, along with their experiences of the available support, with further significant changes in the coming period. This means that the timeliness of the data has been a key consideration. Much of the data collected prior to 2014 – and certainly prior to 2008 – will have limited capacity to provide reliable evidence on the contemporary profile of families with different arrangements, what types and levels of support are now provided, the experiences of negotiating these, and their sustainability. Therefore, when assessing the available data, we have excluded studies conducted prior to 2008, and have concentrated mainly on those which will continue into the future collecting more up-to-date and relevant data on child maintenance. However, we have commented on two key studies – the Survey of Relationship Breakdown and the Families and Children Study – as potential sources of good survey questions on issues around child maintenance.

5.5.1 The UKHLS and the Family Resources Survey (FRS)

From our review of the currently available data – and what we have learnt about likely future data collection – the best up-to-date comprehensive data comes from the UKHLS. It is the key

data source used by government in tracking families' maintenance arrangements and how much is being paid. The FRS also provides cross-sectional time trends. Although it provides less detailed information, it does not suffer from biases related to survey attrition among separating families.

The UKHLS provides a biennial snapshot (since 2011[56]) of separated families' arrangements for non-resident parents' financial support of their children, with most detail from the reports of the resident parents:

- What arrangements are in place (organised through statutory system, courts or privately)
- How much maintenance *should* be paid under the agreement
- Whether maintenance *is* paid, whether paid fully or in part, how much is paid, and timeliness of payments
- Reasons for non-compliance with arrangements
- Reasons for not having an arrangement
- Informal financial support and payments in kind (prevalence not amounts)

Among the key strengths of the UKHLS data are:

- The sample size of resident parents providing these data each wave (over 3,000 in 2011/12).
- The ability to link these data to a wide range of other data about these families, including their contact arrangements, post-separation relationships and family structure, household incomes and work patterns, and data on parent and child outcomes such as health, well-being and educational attainment. Maintenance arrangements can be seen within a more holistic picture of separated families.
- The ability to track maintenance arrangements over time (both longitudinally and cross-sectionally), to look at issues around stability and the effect of changes in policies pertinent to separated families (notably the recent maintenance changes).
- Some potential (albeit with small sample sizes at this stage) to look at families' circumstances prior to separation, and how these relate to maintenance arrangements post-separation. (Currently, the vast majority of resident parents in the sample had separated prior to the start of the panel study.)
- The potential – over time as sample sizes increase – to have data collected from non-resident parents as well as resident parents.

However, given its multipurpose nature, the UKHLS does not currently provide the nuance and depth of data that is ideally required on families' maintenance arrangements. And, from the perspective of measuring the prevalence of different arrangement types or amounts of maintenance paid, the attrition inherent in the panel design means that the statistics are potentially less accurate than a repeat cross-sectional study would be (see below). Most data are collected from the resident parent, with non-resident parents asked a shorter set of questions. This means that the UKHLS is currently much better at looking at the experiences of child maintenance – and its effect on the household income – from the perspectives of resident parents, with limited data on the impact on the non-resident parent household. And it produces even fewer data that enable us to look across both the resident parent and non-

[56] Less detailed information on maintenance was collected in earlier waves and in the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) which preceded the UKHLS,

resident parent household in order to examine the effect of the transfer of income from one household to another.

The UKHLS team is in the process of reviewing its questions on child maintenance in light of recent policy changes. Our observations on the existing questions are:

- Data on maintenance are only collected every two years, and each wave provides a 'snapshot' of the lives of separated families (i.e. it provides 'profile' and 'current circumstances' data every two years). There is limited potential to understand transitions, processes and reasons for change between data collection points (i.e. little on 'pathways and processes').
- In particular, the study collects very little about the initial process of negotiating and setting up initial arrangements after separation. And if questions were added, given the biennial nature of the question module, parents could be being asked retrospectively about the separation process some time after it occurred.
- In amending the questions to reflect recent changes in the statutory maintenance system, the question module could benefit from the inclusion of questions to measure the effect of charging for use of the system (on propensity to use it, on payment levels, on compliance), and more on the use of advice and support services prior to setting up arrangements. With the increased flexibility inherent in family-based arrangements, more needs to be collected about less formal arrangements, such as the amount of money provided informally or as one-off payments to cover particular costs. And further detail is required on the involvement of the statutory system, notably whether the CMS are involved in collecting the maintenance.

The FRS is the other key source of (close to) 'real time' data on maintenance. Its cross-sectional data does not suffer from the attrition of panel studies such as the UKHLS (and the differential high levels of attrition among separating families). It provides data on the types of arrangements that families have, and how much maintenance is paid relative to the amount in the arrangement. The wealth of data on income in the FRS means that it can be used to look at the effect of paying/receiving maintenance on household incomes (see McKay, 2013). The FRS collects these data from *separate* samples of resident parents and non-resident parents. Moreover, unusually, the study is limited by its ability to identify *resident* parents. It identifies people *in receipt* of child maintenance, but not those who are eligible but do not receive it. So, it can be used to look at the numbers of recipients and the arrangements they have, but not the proportions of those eligible. Also, unlike the UKHLS, FRS data on maintenance are not set within a wider context of other issues related to family separation.

5.5.2 The MCS

While the MCS collects fewer data than the UKHLS on child maintenance (whether on use of the statutory system, or on frequency and amount received), like the UKHLS it has the advantage of collecting these alongside a range of data about other aspects of family separation (contact, relationships, and so on), and collecting them longitudinally. What the MCS adds (in comparison with UKHLS) is a range of data on children's outcomes, which can be used to assess the effects of different maintenance patterns. It is therefore a useful source of

data on maintenance arrangements to use *within* a wider picture, but is lacking in terms of a nuanced understanding of the arrangements that separated families make and maintain.

5.5.3 One-off cross-sectional studies on child maintenance

Since 2008, a limited number of cross-sectional studies have collected – or are collecting – data on child maintenance. Given the potential impact of the most recent policy changes, the applicability of all but the most recent will be constrained in terms of what they provide on the profile of families with different arrangements/receiving maintenance and the experiences of making or maintaining them, or the associations between family relationships and the receipt or payment of maintenance. We attempt to highlight here what these studies *do* provide in terms of being useful for the data infrastructure going forward.[57]

The Kids Aren't Free study (Bryson et al, 2013) was a single cross-sectional[58] telephone survey of and qualitative follow-up interviews with single parents on benefit conducted in 2012, providing data on the prevalence and effectiveness of different types of maintenance arrangements within this group five years after the removal of the obligation for them to have statutory maintenance arrangements. Although the prevalence data will become outdated as the current policy changes take effect, this study nonetheless provides relevant and rich quantitative and qualitative data on the views and motivations of single parents on benefit about arranging and maintaining maintenance arrangements, and how these relate to their relationships with their ex-partner and contact between non-resident parents and their children. It also provides data on the proportion of single parents on benefit who were lifted above the poverty line by the maintenance they received.

Contact after separation (Peacey and Hunt, 2009) was a single cross-sectional face-to-face survey of resident parents and non-resident parents, and qualitative interviews with parents and children. The key focus of this study was on the contact arrangements that families made and maintained, with a particular focus on the challenges and difficulties that families faced (see section on parenting and contact). The study provides data on how separated parents perceive the relationship between contact arrangements and non-resident parents' financial support of their children, particularly where one caused problems with the other.

There are a number of DWP surveys and evaluations of 'clients' of the Child Support Agency/Child Maintenance Service (including Patel et al, 2016; Flynn and Smith, 2016; Jackson and Compas, 2016) that provide statistics on the prevalence of arrangements among these specific groups of separated parents and the effectiveness of the Options advice service. These studies have been conducted, and will continue to be conducted, to address the particular policy needs (at any given time) of DWP about those using the statutory service, rather than as a wider research resource.

[57] A new cross-national study (including Australian, UK and the US) led by Dr Kay Cook at the Swinburne University has recently started which, in time, will provide additional up-to-date evidence on child support administration and receipt.

[58] Some comparisons were made with single parents on benefit within the Survey of Relationship Breakdown (Wikeley et al, 2008).

Two key studies conducted prior to 2008 are useful in providing examples of a good range of questions on separated parents' experiences of setting up and maintaining arrangements and the attitudes[59] of separated parents to child maintenance obligations. The Survey of Relationship Breakdown was carried out in 2007 among samples of resident parents and non-resident parents using or not using the (then) Child Support Agency. It collected a range of data on maintenance, informal payments and related issues around contact and the quality of relationships in order to understand – in a cross-sectional setting – the associations between them. The Families and Children Study (FACS) provided a similar (but less detailed) range of data, tracking families longitudinally over the period from 1999 to 2008.

5.5.4 Income and finances

The best available data on the income and finances of separated families are captured within the large-scale longitudinal and cross-sectional multi-purpose studies outlined in Sections 4.4 and 4.5. In terms of their coverage:

- The FRS provides the best coverage of income, and its data are used to produce government statistics on child poverty and average incomes of household groups. With a cross-sectional time series from 1994, it has a large sample size, now around 20,000 UK households. As noted in Section 5.5.2, a major drawback of the FRS is that it cannot identify resident parents unless they are a single parent and/or in receipt of child maintenance.
- The Living Costs and Food Survey (LCFS) primarily focuses on spending, but still has a comprehensive section on incomes. With a time series dating back to the late 1970s, it is used for annual reports on the effects of taxes and benefits on household income[60]. It has value in providing information on how different households spend their resources, but is problematic because of difficulties in dealing with step-families.
- The Labour Force Survey (LFS) and Annual Population Survey collects detail of wages and the receipt of some benefits, but does not capture amounts of other types of incomes. However, it has the advantage of having the largest sample sizes of any UK surveys.
- The MCS has collected varying amounts of detail on income across the waves (with more detail collected in wave 5). It tends to collect more information on employment and wages. It has the advantage of tracking families over time.

The UKHLS (and previously the BHPS) also has a role in measuring child poverty and probably has the strongest coverage of income outside of the FRS and LCFS. Its longitudinal nature allows the tracking of families' incomes over time (and through key transition points), including families who separated during the course of the study. The value of this is that it enables comparison of the pre- and post-separation financial circumstances of families[61] and to track the subsequent trajectories of families. Panel data information of this sort from the BHPS has

[59] The British Social Attitudes survey is another source of questions/data on attitudes to child maintenance, collected among the general population. A limited number of questions have been asked intermittently since 1994. A module of questions looking in more detail at the level of maintenance that the public thinks the law should require non-resident parents to pay was fielded in 2012 and reported on by Bryson et al (2015) http://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/sites/default/files/files/Attitudes_maintenance_v_FINAL%282%29.pdf

[60] http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/household-income/the-effects-of-taxes-and-benefits-on-household-income/index.html.

[61] Differences in legal rights over financial remedies make it important to consider married couples who divorce as a distinct group from cohabitees who stop living together, as well as the jurisdiction in which they live.

been used in Fisher and Low (2009, 2015, 2016) and in Brewer and Nandi (2016). The small sample sizes in the BHPS will be rectified over time as the panel length of the UKHLS extends. Two issues which the UKHLS has strengthened over the BHPS are first, in the identification of income transfers and the role of the statutory child maintenance system; and second, in the following of both partners after-separation.

However, there are some limitations to these analyses because of the nature of the data. Firstly, the maintained assumption in each of these papers is that income pre-separation is fully shared, and so the lower earning partner loses more on separation. If there is no sharing pre-separation, then separation makes less of a difference to living standards. Fisher and Low are working with the UKHLS on an Innovation Panel asking households about the way they share their income. Existing evidence on this issue is from cross-sectional analysis in Vogler et al (2008) and Ashby and Burgoyne (2009) using data from the early 2000s. This analysis does not inform how conditions pre-separation impact on outcomes. Secondly, information on who actually owns the home and in what shares the home was owned has been incomplete. This raises the more general issue about the quality of asset information compared to income information. Many court rulings and settlements on separation or divorce are based on transfer of assets rather than income. Both are needed to get a picture of economic consequences. Finally, there is a particular concern that attrition is non-random when it occurs after a household split. This was discussed for the BHPS in Fisher and Low (2015).

5.6 Divorce and other involvement with the legal system[62]

5.6.1 Studies involving representative samples of separating and separated families

Apart from basic statistics about parents' marital statuses, most research looking at the wider population of separated families includes very little about the divorce process or contact with the legal system related to issues of family separation. Longitudinal studies such as UKHLS and the MCS identify changes in marital statuses between waves (and would therefore pick up separations from cohabitation and divorces). And the UKHLS asks in its relationship history about previous divorces. But these studies – which provide us with the best data on a wide range of other issues related to family separation – provide nothing on experiences of divorce or other involvement in the legal system, on the pathways that families took, and their outcomes following use of the legal system. So, in terms of looking holistically at families' experiences of separation, this is a major evidence gap.

The MoJ has recently undertaken the Legal Problem Resolution Survey, a cross-sectional study of the 10,000 members of the general public in England and Wales measuring the prevalence of problems which might require legal support or intervention, and people's experience of seeking advice or support (Franklyn et al, 2017). However, being a full population sample, the number of respondents who have experienced a relationship breakdown or issue related to family separation in the survey period (the previous 18 months) was only 124.

[62] Professor Karen Broadhurst is leading a scoping study funded by the Nuffield Foundation exploring the demand for and potential scope of a Family Observatory to facilitate better use of research findings and use of administrative data within the family justice system: http://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/towards-family-justice-observatory.

5.6.2 Bespoke studies

There is a range of smaller-scale studies that provide nuanced pictures of particular issues related to separating/separated families' involvement with the legal system – involving particular sub-groups and/or particular substantive issues. In broad terms, these can be split into:

- Those related to children's arrangements
- Those related to financial settlements on divorce and following separation from cohabitation.

These studies employ a range of qualitative and quantitative methods, including court file analysis.

Children's arrangements

Relatively few separated families go to court about arrangements for children following family separation. In England and Wales it is approximately ten per cent of separated families (Blackwell and Dawe, 2003). In Scotland only five per cent of resident parents report using the court in relation to child contact (Marryat et al, 2009).

There has been a modest number of empirical studies over the last two decades of cases where parents have litigated over arrangements for their children following divorce or separation. These studies have addressed a range of questions, from socio-demographic profiles of litigants to outcomes of interventions. Research designs have included observation, casefile analysis, structured and unstructured interviews with family justice professionals, parents and sometimes children. Relatively few studies have incorporated a longitudinal element, though there are examples of prospective studies. There are no experimental designs, although some studies have adopted a matched control group or a quasi-experimental design. As a whole, the field is characterised by studies with relatively small samples, often focused on specific sub-groups within the broader population of litigating families.

As noted above, a small number of studies have sought to establish a socio-demographic and psychosocial profile of families involved in private law litigation and how they might differ from community populations. Two linked reports by Trinder et al (2005; 2006a) drew on structured telephone interviews with up to 250 litigating parents and compared their profile with findings from community studies. The studies suggested that litigants were disproportionately drawn from low-income groups and with poorer mental health compared to community populations.

A number of studies have explored what problems parents have with child arrangements and what they are seeking from the court. These have been based on interviews with parents recruited from court samples (Trinder et al, 2005; 2006a; Smart et al 2005, Laing and Wilson 2010). In contrast, the study of contact problems conducted by Peacey and Hunt (2008) used an omnibus survey to recruit 559 parents, eight to nine per cent of whom had been to court about child contact. Mair et al (2013) used a randomly selected sample of 600 Minutes of Agreements to explore the child arrangements privately negotiated by Scottish parents outside of the court system.

The area that is most studied concerns the type of applications and the immediate outcome of proceedings. Studies have typically been based on analysis of court files, including 430 section 8 applications under the England and Wales 1989 Children's Act (Smart et al, 2003), 289 contact order applications (Hunt and Macleod, 2008) and 197 section 8 applications (Harding and Newnham, 2015). Studies have also included parent interviews (Trinder et al, 2005; 2006a; Smart et al 2005, Laing and Wilson 2010) or observations at court (Bailey-Harris et al, 1999).

Although each is based on relatively modest sample sizes, collectively these studies yield very consistent messages about how the courts approach these types of cases. In particular, studies have indicated that the courts operate on a strong settlement orientation and with a very strong contact presumption (see especially Bailey-Harris et al 1999 and Hunt and Macleod, 2008), with no evidence of gender bias (Smart et al 2003; Hunt and Macleod, 2008; Harding and Newnham, 2015).

A small number of studies have focused specifically on capturing the views of adults and children involved in court proceedings. Smart et al (2005) conducted a postal survey with 112 adults and 61 in-depth interviews with adults involved in section 8 applications in England and Wales. A single study by Timms et al (2007) explored the views of 141 children involved in private law proceedings using a postal survey administered via Cafcass. In Scotland, Mackay (2013) explored whether and how children's views were taken into account by the court, based on analysis of 208 court files.

A number of studies in England and Wales have explored further sub-groups within the litigating population, notably those where there are particular safeguarding concerns or particularly complex issues. Buchanan et al (2001) explored the experience of 100 families where a welfare report had been ordered, based on parent and child interviews. Douglas et al (2006) examined the use of separate representation for children under what was then Rule 9.5 of the Family Proceedings Rules 1991,[63] based on analysis of 121 court files and interviews with 23 parents/carers and fifteen children. Trinder et al (2013) looked at the profile of cases where an enforcement application had been made and explored the response of the court based on analysis of 215 casefiles sampled through the Cafcass administrative data system CMS. Perry and Rainey (2006) analysed cases where the court had ordered supported, supervised or indirect contact, based on analysis of 343 casefiles and 60 parent interviews. Wasoff (2006) explored the views of Sheriff Clerks on enforcement in child contact cases in Scottish sheriff courts.

There have been relatively few outcome studies using any form of control group. Trinder et al (2006a and 2007) explored the short and long-term effectiveness of different types of in-court conciliation and of two different co-parenting or parent education interventions (Trinder et al 2006b; Trinder et al 2011).

Only three studies have explored the adult and child wellbeing of families involved in proceedings. Bream and Buchanan (2003) and Trinder (2006, 2007) both reported lower levels of parent and child wellbeing compared to community populations, using the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ) and Goodman's Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ). Laing and

[63] See now Part 16 of the Family Procedure Rules 2010.

Wilson (2010) found much higher levels of stress using GHQ scores amongst Scottish pursuers (applicants) in contact cases compared to pursuers in divorce actions without contact issues. All the studies cited, however, were based on small samples.

In summary, there have been a number of important studies in this area over the last two decades. Taken together, the studies provide consistent messages about how the courts approach these types of cases, most notably in terms of the presumptions or heuristics that drive decision-making as reflected in the results of applications. There are, however, very significant gaps and limitations. We know comparatively little about the families who do litigate about child arrangements and how they compare to the non-litigating population. Most studies consist of a single snapshot with very little longitudinal work and so we have very little understanding of patterns of use of the courts over time, particularly in relation to repeat or protracted or chronic litigation. There is also very little evidence on the outcomes of court intervention, other than evaluations of specific initiatives. Studies have generally been confined to relatively small samples based on (time-consuming) casefile analysis, sometimes coupled with qualitative interviews. To date there have been no studies that have attempted to link family justice administrative data with other administrative datasets.

Studies of financial settlements

Financial remedy cases have had less research attention in the last decade or so than children cases, though the research gap is beginning to be filled. Studies have adopted various research methods (often mixed): court file surveys, (in Scotland) analysis of private settlements formally registered as Minutes of Agreement and systematic survey of reported cases, client file surveys, observational studies, interviews with judges, interviews with practitioners, interviews with lay parties (who may or may not be clients of lawyers) and focus groups with members of the above. Studies have also differed in the focus of their core research questions: the formal procedures, the roles of key actors within the system and their relationships (e.g. between solicitor and client), the substantive law and outcomes produced, the practical experiences and outcomes for parties following divorce and separation (with or without any court order having been obtained) in the shorter or longer term.

Several studies have closely investigated the role of lawyers, particularly solicitors, in handling these cases. These studies consistently emphasize the settlement-orientation of much family law practice and the role of lawyers in managing client expectations to help the two parties find middle ground. Negotiating with one's own client is as important in this regard as negotiating with the other side, to the extent that researchers have questioned whether "settlement" can properly be equated with genuine "agreement", or whether the efforts of solicitors to bring clients "to heel" and to adopt a conciliatory rather than more partisan approach can have a disempowering effect. Notable studies in this line in England and Wales include Ingleby (1992), Davis et al (1994), Eekelaar et al (2000), and Wright (2007). The multi-faceted nature of financial cases, and the impact on settlement behaviour of non-legal factors, has also been highlighted (see Hitchings, Miles and Woodward, 2013).

Another group of projects in England and Wales have variously included surveys of court files, observational work, interviews and focus groups with judges, court staff and other professionals involved in the court environment. Such studies have had various aims: to

ascertain how the judges exercise the broad discretion conferred on them in this area of law and to explore the types of outcomes being reached; to observe whether, when and how judges (and the parties' lawyers) might seek to secure settlement between litigating parties; and how they handle litigants in person. Notable older studies in this line include Baker et al (1977), Eekelaar (1991), KPMG's study for the LCD (1998), and Davis et al (2000). The studies of the work of family barristers and judges by Maclean and Eekelaar (2009) and Eekelaar and Maclean (2013) included a small number of financial cases. More recently, larger studies by Hitchings, Miles and Woodward (2013, and forthcoming work) and by Woodward with Sefton (2014) have started to fill the research gap that had opened up in relation to financial cases on divorce. These studies have used court files (alongside qualitative interviews and/or focus groups with practitioners and judges) to examine how, when and why money cases are settled, the types of orders being made and in particular (from Woodward, 2014) the treatment of pensions on divorce.

Similar research adopting a rich mix of methods has recently been undertaken in Scotland, where the law of financial provision on divorce and following the separation of cohabitants is entirely different from that in the rest of the UK. These have examined both privately settled and litigated cases (Mair et al, 2013 and 2016), and the use of the financial remedies between cohabitants introduced in 2006 (Wasoff et al, 2010, and agreements between cohabitants identified by Mair et al, 2013).

Naturally, any studies based on court file data, judges' or barristers'/advocates' experiences necessarily deal with only a subset of the divorcing population – less than a third of divorcing spouses in England and Wales now obtain any financial order on divorce, including the vast majority of those orders which are made by consent rather than following adjudication of contested litigation, which is uncommon.[64] Even studies using solicitors or mediators (professionals who might see some couples who do not then take any formal legal action) as research gateways offer no insight into the experience of couples who do not engage in the traditional manner with family justice professionals at all, perhaps obtaining their divorce with the aid of an online or other remote legal service provider and simply resolving financial issues informally. Moreover, the very different nature of the property disputes that may arise between cohabitants on separation in England and Wales are hard to pick up in court file surveys: their applications are not at all readily identifiable from case management systems in the way that divorce files are – though studies via solicitors have yielded valuable qualitative data (Douglas et al, 2007). So, we are dependent on studies drawing on more general population data in order to gain insight into the settlement behaviours and outcomes for all of these families, but, save to the extent that some studies drawing on BHPS/UKHLS data have been able to provide some insights – see 5.5.4 above, and the limitations of current survey data noted there, existing studies in that vein have been small-scale, qualitative projects (e.g. Arthur et al, 2002; Perry et al, 2000). And none of the studies discussed in this section, whether based on court file or other data, have provided a longer-term view of parties' economic and

[64] See HMCTS Family Court Statistics Quarterly publications, tables 10 and 12. The proportion using the courts in Scotland will be considerably lower given the non-judicial process of lodging minutes of agreement to formalise private agreements on divorce and separation from cohabitation (the closest equivalent to English consent orders, which must be made by a judge): see generally Mair et al (2013). Notably, this process does not require the involvement of a lawyer, so some such cases do involve parties who have not taken legal advice – but who have nevertheless taken the step of formalising their arrangements.

other outcomes of the sort that improved cohort or other longitudinal survey data could provide.

5.7 Use and efficacy of support services

Our key focus here is on the evidence that exists on support services for *separating and separated* families. However, because of the interest in the transition into separation (or indeed deciding against separation despite relationship difficulties), we also examine relationship support services more generally.

The vast majority of the existing evidence comes from evaluations of specific interventions or services (see Stock et al, 2014; Abse et al, 2015; Harold et al, 2016 for recent reviews of relationship support services). These evaluations provide piecemeal evidence on the profile of the users of that particular service, how the service works (from provider and user perspectives) and how 'well' it works, with wide variation in the quality of the evidence provided. The evidence base is weak in terms of providing a more holistic picture of the need and demand for support among the separating and separated family population (or indeed the wider population), how and why families access (or do not access) support, where they look for and find it, the barriers and facilitators, outcomes from the support and so on. Given the increased expectation that families negotiate and make their own post-separation arrangements, without state or legal intervention, this gap in the evidence base is significant. In this context, it is not sufficient for the bulk of the evidence to focus on those (usually self-selecting) families who seek support services.

Evaluations of particular interventions and support services employ varied methods of measuring how well they 'work'. Most are hampered by a lack of counterfactual evidence of what would have happened in the absence of that support. At best, they measure short-term *change* in service users' outcomes, comparing them immediately prior to and post support, with some studies including a follow-up a short number of months later. Other studies simply ask users to reflect on the extent to which they perceive the support to have helped.

Some studies ask parents in broad terms what advice or support services they have used. The data are usually restricted to what they have done within a recent given time period, asking parents to choose from a given long-list of potential services. We have found no examples of studies that have attempted to unpick levels of (met and unmet) demand/need for different types of support, the processes that families go through when seeking support, and the outcomes from that support. Barlow et al's *Mapping* study looked at the experience of out of court dispute resolution, but their study captures experiences prior to the 2013 legal aid changes which made mediation and litigating in person the only options for those unable to pay for traditional legal advice (Barlow et al, 2014; Barlow et al, 2017). Given changes to the statutory and legal systems about post-separation arrangements, the time period in which the data are collected is important, limiting the value of data collected prior to these changes.

5.8 Summing up

The current data infrastructure provides a relatively broad brush picture of family life during and after separation, allowing for the generation of a number of core statistics. However, there are a good number of gaps in the evidence that will not be filled without new data collection. In particular, data are required to understand how separation is experienced, the trajectories which families follow and the consequences of these.

6 Building a data infrastructure to fill the evidence gaps

6.1 Introduction

Our assessment of the evidence needs, combined with our review of currently available data, has highlighted the need for additional data on separating and separated families. These would supplement the existing (or planned) data on issues related to family separation. The nature of the evidence needs on family separation means that new data will need to be:

1. **collected directly from families** (i.e. not through additional administrative data)
2. **quantifiable**, albeit valuably supplemented by more in-depth qualitative data
3. **collected longitudinally**.

One option is to maximise the potential of the UKHLS. This could be done by a) including additional questions focused on separated families and b) by reviewing the study's existing strategies for retaining separated parents with the aim of improving the panel retention rates for these parents, and, in particular, non-resident parents. For research questions that are non-urgent and for which several years of cumulative data are acceptable, enhancing the UKHLS in these ways would generate a very valuable resource. We set out in Section 6.2 below what changes might be made to UKHLS. Two possible approaches are described. The first is a 'minimal change' model, which would address a few of the evidence gaps. The second is a more ambitious model that would generate much better evidence.

The generalised nature of the UKHLS and its small sample of separating families, does, however, mean it is not the *ideal* model for a longitudinal study of separation. In Section 6.4, therefore, we set out a second option: a new, dedicated longitudinal study of families with children, focusing on separation. We describe what it would add, and how such a study might be designed.

Then, in Section 6.5 we look at a third option, which is based on a combination of the enhanced UKHLS plus a new longitudinal study of currently separated families (with a large boost sample of the newly separated).

In Section 6.6 we set the case for setting up a small version of this third option survey design, with the primary aim of using it as a vehicle for testing approaches to recruiting and retaining separated parents, especially non-resident parents.

Finally, in Section 6.7 we include a short discussion of another 'lighter touch' option, which is to develop a short set of standardised questions around separation and then lobby for their inclusion in a broad range of relevant government social surveys.

6.2 Enhancing the UKHLS

Adding questions to UKHLS that focus on post-separation issues is almost certainly the least costly way of improving the amount, range and quality of data on separation in the UK.[65] The key advantage is that the UKLHS is a longitudinal study covering all types of households so it generates data both pre- and post-separation. Additional questions on post-separation experiences would generate data that could be used in conjunction with (the somewhat richer) existing pre-separation data, and would help address research questions around that link. There are, however, a number of disadvantages:

- The primary disadvantage is the sample size. Although the UKHLS is a very large study, with close to 30,000 households in the panel, only a third of these have children. Of those with children, around three-quarters are two-parent households at any one wave, and the separation rate per year amongst these is around two per cent. The effect is that, after non-response, the UKHLS only identifies and goes on to interview around 100 newly separating families each year. For analysis with a specific focus on pre- and post-separation, a larger sample than 100 will almost always be required, so multiple years of data would need to be aggregated (at least six years for a sample of 500 separations with pre and post separation data; over a decade for a sample of 1,000). If questions were added to the 2018 wave, data for the smaller of these sample sizes would only become available after 2023/24. Inevitably, this raises problems for analysis with a policy focus – the sample size is just too small and the timescales too long to identify all but very large shifts in outcomes following a policy change.

- A related disadvantage is that of non-response, especially amongst non-resident parents. As we documented in Section 4, the UKHLS to date has not managed to retain many non-resident parents in the study post-separation. Of the 138 couples with children that were known to have separated between Waves 1 and 2, interviews were achieved at Wave 2 with 119 resident parents, but just 54 non-resident parents. While it may prove very difficult to improve the response rate for non-resident parents, ideally there would be a review of the retention strategy for these parents with the aim of identifying methods that might help increase the response rate and the representativeness of the non-resident parent sample.

Inevitably, in terms of enhancing UKHLS, there is a range of options going forward. A 'minimal change' model would be to add a small number of extra questions for separated resident parents and non-resident parents, collected as part of the main interview, with no radical change of the retention strategy. The key priority areas for these extra questions are listed below:

For all separated families:

- Expanding the existing questions on parenting roles so they are asked of non-resident parents as well as (currently) resident parents;
- A question or two on co-parenting;

[65] The UKHLS team held a workshop in November 2016, focusing more widely on the data collected in the UKHLS on family formation and family structure, and how this might be adapted or developed in future waves.

- Parent-child relationships;
- Revised questions on financial support, which reflect changes in the statutory child maintenance system (which are asked in the same format of both resident parents and non-resident parents);
- (Brief) reasons for changes between waves in child living arrangements and financial support.

For families separated since the previous wave:

- Reasons for separation and whose decision it was[66]

However, a more 'comprehensive approach' could be adopted where separated families were invited to take part in an additional between-wave interview (or online survey). These additional interviews would focus on particular issues and be triggered by information given in the main interview. This approach would substantially augment the data that the UKHLS collects on family separation without significantly lengthening the main interview.[67]

The primary 'trigger point' would be a family separation, given the strong need for more data on the recently separated. The additional interview would cover issues including:

- Reasons for separation;
- Experience of separating, for parents and children;
- Making arrangements: children's living arrangements and time together, financial support, housing and other property-related issues;
- Use of legal, statutory and third sector support in relation to separation.

Ideally, new resident parents and non-resident parents would be interviewed *twice* after separation – with interviews being one year apart. This is recommendation is made in light of evidence that families can take up to two years to reach some equilibrium after separation (Chase-Lansdale and Hetherington, 1990).

Other trigger points for additional interviews would include new transition points. Examples include one of the separated parents re-partnering or having children; substantial changes in children's living arrangements (e.g. which parent they live with) or contact with their non-resident parent; one or other party initiating divorce proceedings; and so on. The same model could also be used to ask more generally about families' post-separation arrangements. Families could be invited periodically to take part in an interview that collected some of the more detailed and nuanced information on family dynamics and family circumstances articulated in Section 2.

Note that new partners and their children would be eligible for the UKHLS, provided they were living with the resident parent or non-resident parent, so the standard UKHLS interviews would be used with them. In other words, the current UKHLS sample design allows for the inclusion of step-parents and step-children within the study. This provides the potential to include them

[66] These questions are being tested in the forthcoming UKHLS Innovation Panel.
[67] This would be in addition to the additional questions we would welcome in the core interview.

in any additional interview study (e.g. one that focuses specifically on step-family relationships).

If the decision were made to include the longer suite of questions and extra interviews, it would be appropriate to take the opportunity to review the retention strategies for both resident parents and non-resident parents, particularly the latter. This might include adopting one or more of the strategies below:

- For separated couples who were together at Wave 1 and where the non-resident parent has been lost to the UKHLS, fresh attempts might be made to re-introduce him into the study. Where contact with the non-resident parent has been made but he has declined to take part in the study, this might involve including a specific explanation of why his involvement is important, but it might also involve offering a larger incentive. Where contact has been lost with the non-resident parent, fresh attempts might be made to make contact. This might involve multiple approaches. For instance, incentivising the resident parent to make the first contact (assuming the resident parent is still in touch with the non-resident parent) or, if not, trying again via the named stable contact. Given the relatively small numbers that would need to be traced, it is likely that more bespoke methods would be feasible than would be possible for a large number of non-contacts.

- For couples currently together but who may separate in future waves, retention strategies would be needed that minimise the tendency to lose resident parents and, particularly, non-resident parents from the UKHLS after separation. These strategies might involve adapting the literature that goes to families to explain why it is so important that they stay with the study if they do separate, and the importance of the stable contact.

6.3 Setting up a new longitudinal study - overview

Although enhancing the UKHLS in the way described above would considerably improve the evidence base around family separation, the limited questionnaire space plus the small sample numbers of separations per year does mean it would not be a perfect solution. Almost certainly, the most comprehensive approach would be to set up a *new* longitudinal study of families with a very specific focus on separation.

The primary advantages of setting up such as study would be that a dedicated survey would allow for all (or at least a considerable proportion) of the questionnaire space to be devoted to issues pertinent to separation, and, ideally, the sample size would be large enough to give sufficient numbers of separating and separated families for analysis of both short- and longer-term issues. Integral to the design would be the ability to follow-up with particular sub-groups of interest to look at specific issues in more detail (either qualitatively or quantitatively). A further advantage is that a survey with a specific focus on separation *should* be better placed to test and implement strategies that help retain separated parents in a longitudinal study, including retaining non-resident parents.

There are two broad designs that a dedicated longitudinal survey might adopt. The first, and probably ideal, design would be a longitudinal study of all families with children. Such a survey

would begin, at baseline, with a cross-sectional sample of families with children, irrespective of whether they were intact or separated. Those families would then be followed up over time, with some of the parents separating and others not. This is, in essence, the UKHLS design but it would exclude households without dependent children. This would, of course, be an extremely complex and expensive study to set up and run. It would, however, be the ideal design for studying the relationship between pre and post-separation outcomes.

An alternative longitudinal design would be a study that started, at baseline, with a sample of *currently separated* families (irrespective of when they separated), plus a significantly sized boost sample of the newly separated (who would otherwise be only a small percentage of the whole baseline sample). Such a study would give very useful data at baseline on a cross-sectional sample of separated families and this in itself would address a large number of the evidence gaps. Over time, the study would generate data on trajectories and outcomes for separated families. The boost of the newly separated would allow for the tracking of these trajectories from soon after the separation. What such a study would not give is any data pre-separation, over and above any data that could be collected retrospectively. The link between pre- and post-separation would still need to be studied using the UKHLS or other existing longitudinal studies.

In Sections 6.4 and 6.5 we describe these two designs in more detail, setting out what we see as their advantages and disadvantages.

Note that both of these designs are, as described below, about the 'general population' of separated families. But both designs would reasonably easily accommodate boost samples (e.g. of Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland), or parallel, longitudinal studies, of particular groups, assuming that a sampling frame to identify those groups could be identified and accessed and assuming that the questionnaires to be used are broadly the same. For example, a longitudinal study of CSA users might be added, or a longitudinal study of court users. Alternatively, if the 'general population' samples identified sub-sets of separated families following pathways of particular interest then additional interviews (quantitative or qualitative) might be introduced. Of particular importance would be to ensure sufficient sample sizes of previously cohabiting and well as previously married separated parents, given differences the legal situation regarding financial remedies for these two groups.

For either design, decisions would need to be made about what constituted a 'family separation'. There are two key areas where defining whether a family is 'intact' (i.e. the child lives with both parents) or 'separated' can be problematic. Firstly, for some families, parents' relationships can be fluid, both in terms of whether they perceive themselves to be 'in a relationship' and/or whether they live together or spend some time overnight in the same household. Secondly, the transition from being 'intact' to being 'separated' is not necessarily clear cut. The process of 'separating' can be elongated, both in terms of emotional engagement and making the necessary living, financial and child arrangements. And, certainly, whether the parents live together or not is not necessarily an appropriate way to define whether or not the family is 'intact' or 'separated'. Previous studies have used either household residency (with standard survey definitions of who counts as a household member) or a respondent's report of whether they are in a relationship with the other parent. However, a study focusing specifically on family separation would necessarily need to adopt a more nuanced definition,

taking into account the full range of factors. This would be much easier in the first study design (including both intact and separated families), as the definition adopted would not be used to decide which families were eligible or ineligible for the study.[68]

6.4 New Longitudinal Study 1: A survey of families with dependent children

The optimal design for studying family separation would almost certainly be a dedicated longitudinal survey of families. This would follow a very similar design to the UKHLS but the questionnaire would be focussed on issues pertinent to parenting pre- and post-separation rather than covering the broad range of topics that are covered in UKHLS, and it would focus on families with dependent children rather than the general population of households.[69]

Such a survey would start with a cross-sectional sample of families with any dependent children (that is, a representative sample of intact and separated families). These families (and their individual family members, including children) would be surveyed at regular interviews, with the potential for additional tracking through administrative data systems and qualitative follow-ups with sub-samples of interest. In terms of using this study to provide data on family separation, the primary aim would be to identify, and track, families who separated during the course of the study, with those families who did not separate largely generating comparative data. For families that separated during the study, the intention would be to survey resident parents and non-resident parents, children, and new partners. For families separated at the start of the study, ideally the non-resident parent would also be recruited into the study at the first wave.

This design would have a number of very desirable features:

- For families who separated, data would be available on both the 'before' and 'after' periods, allowing the relationship between pre- and post-separation outcomes to be studied;
- Within a dedicated survey, it would be possible to devote much of the questionnaire to questions about family life pre- and post-separation and about the separation itself;
- Separating families are known to be particularly prone to non-response in longitudinal surveys (see Section 4 for the UKHLS evidence on this). For a survey dedicated to the subject of 'family life', it would be possible to channel resources into keeping those families that separate in the study (e.g. larger incentives; more efforts made to trace; more flexibility about interviewing approaches and times; greater understanding (and therefore retention) among respondents about why the study should continue to include both parents, as well as additional family members in newly-formed families);

[68] Note, our designs would exclude families where the child lives with neither parent. The specific issues involved in such families would make them unsuitable for the kind of large-scale study of family separation proposed here – rather they would require a bespoke study/questionnaire approach.

[69] We feel there is value in tracking families beyond the age at which young people are technically 'dependent' – perhaps to age 25 (in line with other policies around young people).

- The survey would automatically generate comparable data on intact families. This would allow for a better understanding of the causal impact of separation;
- Unlike an age-cohort survey, a survey that started with a sufficient sized sample of existing families would generate a sample of children of separated families of all age-groups at each wave of data collection (and therefore across different stages of policy development, across the economic cycle, etc.).

However, although such a design would be very close to ideal, it has the very major disadvantage that it would be extremely expensive to set up and run, relative to the number of families for which both pre- and post- separation data would be collected. The two main features of the design that drive the costs are:

- *Sample size*. A longitudinal survey of families dedicated to separation would probably need to start with an achieved sample size of at least 28,000 families of whom around 20,000 will be intact at Wave 1. This would yield (if parents could be retained within the study) around 300 to 400 separations per year, which would be large enough for detailed analysis of this group year on year, and (unlike the UKHLS) would allow for detailed analysis with just a small number of years of accumulated data. This sample size is more than twice the size of the UKHLS, which has around 10,000 families.[70] A smaller sample size, of say, 10,000 to 15,000 families *might* be acceptable but it would take several years to accumulate a large enough sample size of newly separated families for in-depth analysis of that group (as well as sufficient sub-samples by child age, and other subgroup analysis). As a consequence, funders would need to commit to a longer-term study.

- *Interview mode.* It is probable that much of the interviewing for the study, including all the interviews with intact families, would need to be carried out face-to-face. The need to identify which families in the study have separated wave on wave would make the use of cheaper modes (such as postal or online, and perhaps even telephone) problematic because of the likelihood that such modes would lead to non-response amongst those that had recently separated.[71]

Based on these two features (an assumption of primarily face-to-face interviews, and a starting sample of around 28,000 families), we anticipate such a survey costing at least £4m per year.[72] This is based on an assumption that even in a very large study (where there are economies of scale) a face-to-face interview would cost at least £150 per family. Crucially, funders of any such study would have to accept that in the baseline year around 98 per cent of the data collection (and hence around 98 per cent of the costs) would be with families who were either intact (70 per cent) or had already separated (28 per cent) with just two percent of families

[70] The UKHLS is much larger than this overall (starting sample was 40,000 households) because most households do not contain dependent children.

[71] Alternative (cheaper) modes may be possible for separated families, once their commitment to the study post-separation is established.

[72] Note, we are currently assuming annual data collection. However, where a family separation is identified, it may be valuable to have more frequent data collection in the period after separation, during a period of potentially rapid changes in circumstances. However, the advantage of additional data collection would need to be weighed up against issues of respondent burden, particularly during a period of likely stress on the family.

being recently separated. Assuming an 80 per cent response rate at each wave post baseline, by Year 5 a starting sample of 20,000 intact families would have generated at least one year of data on around 1,300 separating families.

Ideally, if such a study were to be set up, it would run for a considerable time. Unless many years of data collection were committed to, the study would not generate a long time series pre- and post-separation per family and the primary advantage of the design would be undermined.

Given the cost issues, our expectation is that to make such a study value-for-money the study would need to be broadened so that it generated data on the lives of *all* families (parents and children), both intact and separated – over and above the data that UKHLS and the cohort studies already provide, whilst still retaining the focus on separation. Whilst there may well be a case for this, this was not part of our consultation on evidence needs, which explored in depth what was required about family *separation*.

6.5 New Longitudinal Study 2: A survey of separated families

If a longitudinal study of 'all families' does not look to be feasible then an alternative design would be a longitudinal study that focused on tracking outcomes for parents and children after separation. Such a study would start, at baseline, by recruiting a sample of currently separated families (irrespective of how long ago the separation took place). But given the particular interest in the decisions and experiences in the period immediately post-separation, recruiting a large boost sample of the newly separated would add considerable value.

What this design would allow for is tracking the experience of being a resident parent (and ideally non-resident parent, if he can be recruited via the resident parent) post-separation and the outcomes (both shorter and longer term) for these parents and their children. What it would *not* do, of course, would be to allow for the tracking of families both pre- and post-separation. So, although outcomes after separation could be studied, the study would not provide data (beyond questions that can be asked retrospectively) on the family prior to the separation. Research questions that rely on having both pre- and post-separation data would still need to be addressed via analysis of the UKHLS and/or the birth cohorts. Furthermore, for the families who separated some time ago, the data collected would be mainly about trajectories and outcomes, with relatively little being captured about the circumstances of the separation (again, beyond what can be asked retrospectively).

6.5.1 What this design would add

A longitudinal study of currently separated families is, of course, already embedded within the UKHLS, with a large sample of just over 3,000 resident parents at Wave 3. The advantage of a new study would be the questionnaire content. With its primary focus on the experiences of and outcomes from family life post-separation, it could afford to contain a range of detailed and nuanced data on living and contact arrangements, co-parenting, financial support and resourcing, use of support and legal services, and so on, which is just not possible in surveys with a more wide-ranging focus, such as UKHLS

In sampling terms, this design would make the greatest contribution, compared to the UKHLS, in the recruitment and tracking of a large sample of the newly separated. As we have described earlier, the sample of the newly separated in the UKHLS per year is fairly low, at around 100 separations a year. A new study would be able to recruit many more than that.

To maximise the value of this design, it would be important to have a longitudinal comparison sample of intact families so that the pathways of the two types of family could be compared. A sample of intact families could be recruited relatively easily, and interviewed, alongside the separated families sample, but a most cost-effective approach would probably be to use the UKHLS as the comparison.

6.5.2 Methodological issues

If this design were to be adopted a number of methodological issues would need to be tackled, the key ones being sampling frames, the recruitment of non-resident parents, and the usefulness of a comparison sample of intact families.

In terms of the sampling, recruiting a representative sample of currently separated resident parents would not be particularly problematic. The natural approach would be to recruit via another large-scale survey. (The English Longitudinal Survey of Ageing recruits older people from the Health Survey for England, so there are precedents for this approach.)

The more difficult sampling problem would be recruiting a representative sample of the newly separated. Recruitment from an existing survey would be possible *if* that survey were large enough and administered sufficiently frequently. Given that only around 0.6 per cent of households would qualify as newly separated, to recruit, say, 500 newly separated resident parents in a single year would require a survey with a sample of at least 100,000 households per year. The only government-funded survey with a sample this large is the ONS Annual Population Survey, but ONS have advised us that recruitment via that survey is unlikely to be agreed. The alternative would be to recruit newly separated resident parents via a large commercial omnibus survey, but these use quota-based sampling for recruitment rather than random probability sampling, and the representativeness of a sample of the newly separated recruited in this way is uncertain.

The second major methodological issue is the recruitment of non-resident parents. Ideally, the study would recruit both the resident parent and non-resident parent. The identification and recruitment of resident parents would not pose particular problems, over and above the sampling problems described above. But the recruitment of non-resident parents to a study that recruits after the separation has taken place is likely to be extremely difficult. Different methods for recruiting non-resident parents would need to be trialled, including recruiting resident parents and then trying to recruit the non-resident parent via her.

The alternative approach would be to recruit both (unmatched) resident parents and non-resident parents into the study independently and then attempt to recruit the other parent via them. This is largely uncharted territory, in the context of a large-scale survey, with the existing evidence on what might work being very limited. The greatest difficulty is likely to be

identifying, and recruiting, an independent sample of non-resident parents. Screening for non-resident parents via an Omnibus survey has been attempted on a number of occasions (e.g. Peacey and Hunt, 2009; Wikeley et al, 2008), with limited success. The proportion of non-resident parents identified through these screening exercises is lower than it should be (i.e. much lower than the proportion of resident parents identified) and those with poor relationships and less involvement are routinely under-represented.

In terms of cost, a longitudinal survey of currently separated families would be considerably less expensive than the longitudinal survey of families described in Section 6.4. If the cost per interview was, say, around £400 (including the costs of recruitment, set-up and so on), a starting sample of 2,500 families would cost £1m per year.

6.6 The case for an initial modest-scale, two-wave, study of currently separated families

For both of the designs described above (a longitudinal survey of all families or a longitudinal survey of separated families), there are clearly methodological issues that would make committing to one or the other a high-risk strategy. First and foremost, both of the designs would ideally include non-resident parents in the sample, yet no survey to date has successfully identified and recruited a representative sample of this group and the UKHLS experience is that retention of non-resident parents after separation is difficult.[73] Secondly, a particular concern for a longitudinal survey about separation is that families who separate are thought to be some of the hardest families to retain over time. This is partly because separation, and re-partnering, can trigger a house move as well as changes to phone numbers (both landlines and mobiles) and email addresses, as well as changes to surnames; but also because the experience of being separated itself perhaps makes parents less likely to find the time to participate in research. For a longitudinal survey of families with children, the primary issue would be retention both during and after a separation; for a longitudinal survey of the currently separated with a specific boost of the newly separated, the primary issue would be recruitment and retention of the newly separated group, especially those whose lives are still unsettled.

Given the costs of a new longitudinal study, coupled with the methodological issues and risks, our belief is that the best *first step* would be to set up a modest-scale survey of currently separated families (with a boost of newly separated families) using the broad design described above, with commitment to *one* wave of follow-up. That is, each family would be interviewed twice – although consent for future follow-ups would be collected. This would ideally be carried out alongside some, or all, of the changes to the UKLHS described in Section 6.2. As well as attempting to tackle the methodological issues above, this modest-scale survey would be used to develop nuanced survey questions to capture post-separation parenting (currently a key evidence gap with few survey questions capturing the detail of co-parenting) and to develop the optimal approaches to involving children and other family members (e.g. step-relatives).

In terms of sample size, a two-wave study that started with around 500 currently separated families and 250 recently separated would probably be appropriate although larger would be

[73] As we note above, we are proposing some methodological work on the UKHLS Innovation Panel.

preferable. A sample of this size would be large enough to generate detailed data about separation, and probably large enough to allow for some split-run experiments on recruitment and retention strategies, especially for non-resident parents.[74] At the same time, it would not be so large as to preclude adapting recruitment strategies to address individual circumstances.

Given the evidence that families can take up to two years to reach some equilibrium after separation, there is an argument for a *further* follow-up of the families newly separated at Wave 1, in order to fully test the feasibility of retaining families within the survey, and collecting data on post-separation circumstances. However, this would be something to be decided after assessing the wave 1 baseline and wave 2 follow-up surveys.

This initial study would have two key aims:

- To provide data to address the information needs on separated families that can be addressed largely using cross-sectional data (and make these publicly available to be analysed). The one-year follow-up would give some data on short-term changes in family circumstances, with the primary interest here being those who were newly separated at baseline.
- To test the feasibility of recruiting (to wave 1) and retaining (in wave 2) separated families, particularly non-resident parents, thereby adding to the body of methodological evidence in this area.

6.7 The benefits of adding a set of standardised questions to existing surveys

The design options described above involve either fairly considerable changes to the UKLHS or large-scale new longitudinal data collection on newly recruited samples of families. There is one other possible way to add to the evidence base using surveys that is less ambitious, but would still be extremely helpful: to add a small set of standardised questions about family separation to existing government surveys. These standardised questions could collect 'summary' data on core issues such as financial support, contact, parenting and relationships. At relatively low cost, this would have the potential to increase the evidence base on family separation quite substantially. This option would at least address the issues of consistent questions, wording and response options to make data from different sources comparable or capable of aggregation.

For instance, were such a module of standardised questions added to any survey involving sufficient numbers of separated families, we would obtain data on the associations between family separation and a range of issues where data are currently lacking. Potential surveys suitable for this include the DfE Childcare Survey, DWP Maternity and Paternity Rights Survey,

[74] A sample of this size would allow for fairly large differences in recruitment and retention rates to be identified in a 50:50 split-run experiment. For the newly separated, for example, comparison of two groups each of size 375 would allow for differences of around 10 percentage points to be detected as significant. For more subtle effects larger sample sizes would be needed.

the Health Survey for England, the Family Resources Survey, and the Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey. The questions could also be used in studies focusing on a particular issue around family separation (e.g. an intervention of a support service) which cannot afford the space to take a detailed holistic view of other aspects of the families' lives, but could usefully add a short series of questions.

The advantage of developing a *standardised* set of questions is that it would allow for direct comparisons between surveys fielding the same questions across different aspects or populations of separated families. In addition, developing a standard set would save on subsequent questionnaire development time, could be thoroughly tested for reliability and validity, and practical aspects (such as how long they take to be administered) would all be documented.

However, although we see this as a very useful way forward, our experience to date has not been encouraging. Questionnaire space on most surveys has to be fought for and there are often competing demands. We have proposed questions be added to two surveys recently (the Child and Young People Mental Health Survey and the Millennium Cohort Study) but on both occasions have not been successful, on the grounds of our needs not having sufficient priority. Without the backing of individual government departments, we would not anticipate being more successful on other surveys.

The table below summarises the options presented in this chapter.

Options	Advantages	Disadvantages
Enhancing the UKHLS	Makes optimal use of existing longitudinal studies; less expensive than setting up a new longitudinal study	Limited space to add new questions; small numbers of separations per year
New longitudinal study of families with dependent children	The ideal vehicle for tracking families pre and post separation; a larger sample size of families than the UKHLS would increase the number of separations per year; new strategies for reducing attrition after separation could be trialled.	Extremely expensive model; considerable methodological issues to overcome before success of recruitment of retention post-separation could be guaranteed
New longitudinal study of separated families	Would allow for outcomes post-separation to be tracked using a bespoke questionnaire	Expensive to set up and maintain; considerable methodological issues to overcome before success of recruitment and retention could be guaranteed; not clear how NRPs would be identified and recruited.
Two-wave pilot longitudinal study of separated families	Would generate useful cross-sectional and short-term outcome data on separation; would be a good vehicle for testing methodology	Still a significant financial investment; there is a risk that such a study does not successfully identify strategies for recruitment and retention of NRPs in particular.
Adding standardised questions to existing surveys	The least expensive option; could yield a considerable amount of cross-sectional data on the association between separation and child and parent outcomes	Most data will be cross-sectional rather than longitudinal; different outcomes would be measured in different surveys, so no ability to study interactions across outcome domains.

7 Key concluding points

- Despite the very large numbers, and proportion, of children not living with both parents, there are insufficient data being collected that reflect the range of family structures in today's society, with the 'child(ren) and their two parents' model still dominant. While we can often profile different family structures, we do not have the data to understand the experiences, trajectories and outcomes of families in these different structures. And what data we have are most strongly focused on the perspectives of resident parents, with far less understood about the perspectives of children, non-resident parents and step-relatives.

- While there is growing recognition of this, with a desire for evidence from across government, academia and the third sector, there are no easy solutions to improving the data available on separated families. In fact, government spending cuts on research, reduced access to statutory and legal services resulting in fewer families appearing in administrative datasets, and the cancellation of the most recent birth cohort all contribute to the potential reduction in data on separated families going forwards.

- Many of our evidence needs require longitudinal data, tracking the same families over time. However, the existing longitudinal studies cannot reasonably be expected to cater for the full range of evidence needs on family separation, limited particularly by competing constraints on interview time and modest sample sizes of families who separate each year.

- In a world of less restricted budgets, the optimal solution would be to launch a longitudinal study of families with dependent children, as we ideally need data on families before they separate as well as after. However, the costs of such a study are high if the primary focus of the study were just family separation, given that the prevalence of separation is very low, meaning the majority of data collected would be from intact families. In our view, the costs of this option are not likely to be justifiable unless there was a strong call for the additional data on both two-parent as well as one-parent families included in the study.

- A more realistic – but still valuable – solution would be to bolster existing studies as much as possible and launch a longitudinal study of separating and separated families. Such a study would provide very useful data on a cross-sectional sample of separated families, and would address a large number of the evidence gaps. Over time, the study would generate data on trajectories and outcomes for separated families. However, there are methodological challenges to this approach, including the lack of a sampling frame from which to identify resident and non-resident parents without large-scale screening, and challenges in achieving representative samples of non-resident parents. We would continue to rely on existing longitudinal studies for analysis requiring data collected prior to separation.

- However, prior to recommending any such investment, we need stronger evidence on the feasibility of collecting robust longitudinal data from a representative sample of separated families. We therefore recommend a modest-scale two-wave study that would provide a

methodological testing ground and produce substantive evidence to address a number of shorter-term information needs.

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Appendix A: CLOSER Discovery

CLOSER's mission is to maximise the use, value and impact of the UK's longitudinal studies, helping to increase the number of researchers who are confident and able to analyse longitudinal data (http://www.closer.ac.uk/).

CLOSER Discovery is an online resource that enables researchers to search and explore the data from eight leading UK longitudinal studies including:

- 1970 British Cohort Study
- Hertfordshire Cohort Study
- 1958 National Child Development Study
- MRC National Survey of Health and Development
- Southampton Women's Survey
- Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children
- Millennium Cohort Study
- UK Household Longitudinal Study

CLOSER Discovery allows researchers to interrogate the questions that have been asked in each of the studies and preview summary statistics on the variables. As part of our study, we have worked with the CLOSER Discovery team to identify survey questions which are relevant to researchers studying family separation. Within the CLOSER Discovery webpages, we have set up a 'basket' containing all of the variables of interest, to date across the Millennium Cohort Study and UKHLS datasets. As more waves of data are uploaded to CLOSER Discovery, we will incorporate them into the basket. At the time of publication of this report, this 'basket' is not yet visible on the CLOSER Discovery website (timing to be confirmed but expected Summer 2017), but if you would like to view it in the meantime please contact amy(at)askresearch.org.uk who will provide you with access.